One thousand first times

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by the_most_happy

Summary

Chuuya's life is unexpectedly great: Yokohama is at peace, he hasn't seen Dazai since Meursault and his wine cellar is always full.

But, when Double Black is asked to take care of a Gifted child, Chuuya faces the ghosts of his past: his heart, his old partner, his loyalty.

He can't fail this mission. He owes it to the child, to the Flags, to his family, to himself.

Enter Dazai.

Or: Nakahara Chuuya's guide on how to raise a child with your traitor ex-partner (that you might be in love with).

And **of course** there's only one bed.

Rainmaker

"*Project Arahabaki.*"

There was too much blood pooling on the curb under the man.

It wasn't any different from the liquid soaking Chuuya's gloves or splashing his cheeks, lighting up his blue eyes with a violent flame: deep crimson, thick in texture.
The red soaked the man's skin, his heavy black coat and the child he held to his chest in a shaky embrace; she was pressed against the man's chest, wrapped in an adult-like oversized jacket splashed with red.

Any onlooker stumbling upon the scene would have assumed the man had angered the Port Mafia, that they had been punished. Three gunshots and a kick smashing the skull: such was the way of the Mafia.

They would have been wrong, missing the corpses Chuuya had left behind in the darkness of the alley; they could not see the black-dressed Yakuza soldiers hunting in full Port Mafia territory, made stupid by greed. They had paid for their stupidity with their lives, crushed into the concrete by gravity. Port Mafia executive Nakahara Chuuya had taken three lives that night, all to rescue the dying person he was facing now: a stranger huddled against a dirty wall like a cornered animal, hugging a tiny creature of a child that had the entire Yokohama buzzing. The city came alive with every powerful Gifted, salivating and baring claws.

A man who was going to die anyway.

A man who knew *who he was.*

Chuuya took in the name, eyes wide as the sound sunk into his bones. He had barely whispered it, but it echoed like a cannonball in his brain.

"How do you know that name?"

"Nakahara— *Chuuya—"* A pause. Chuuya swore he could see the flash of a smile on the stranger's agonizing face. "Long time no— see."

He shivered. "I don't know you."

"Perhaps, but *we* know you."

We. Chuuya froze. *We know.*
Registering the implications of those words hurt more than forcing himself to finally, fully realize the extent of the fluids that splashed the man's face, his round cheeks and coarse stubble. Blood also tainted the wall of the alley behind his sturdy body – he had the frame of an army man, the solid building of a foreigner raised in military bases.

And the army man knew his name – hell, not just his name. His past.

When he kneeled and hoisted an arm, the man didn't retract. He didn't even flinch as Chuuya's hand descended on his shoulder, gloved fingers sinking through the clothes and into the flesh; they'd leave bruises on a corpse.
"Who sent you?"

"I am an ally." His wheezing breath stuttered as he coughed, caught in Chuuya's grip. "After professor Nakahara's d—"

"Careful with the names you throw around," Chuuya interrupted, voice as soft as thunder. "I'm still in time to turn your last moments into a bloody nightmare." *He had no father, his family was the Port Mafia, and N was dead.* He repeated it in his mind to remind himself of that, rather than to prove it to the dying man. "What. is your. *damn.* name?"

"M."

A raspy laughter climbed up Chuuya's throat. "M? Are you *shitting* me?!" His grip hardened. "Tell me, and I'll let you meet your gods."

Almost reactively, the man held the child to his collarbone, hands soaked in blood, shaking so violently that he almost dropped the bundle of bloodied clothes and fluids and sweat.
Him, *her.*
Chuuya didn't really care.

It was too late for the man. His bubbling breathing pattern betrayed a crushed rib cage. He'd lost too much blood. He would not make it past the road.
And Chuuya should have murdered him *twice* over for assuming he was in any way related to a psycho bastard; he wasn't, just as he wasn't Verlaine's brother.

He was no one, and he was free. He'd paid that freedom in ounces of blood. He'd traded it with the lives of his comrades.

"Look." He spoke slowly, soothingly. He didn't tell the man he was going to be okay because it wasn't true, and he had no reason to lie; not to a stranger. "Just tell me your name, alright? And I'll take care of the rest."

"M. Doctor M."

"Oh, fuck's *sake-"*

"Take her."

Instinctively, Chuuya froze as a jolt of suspicion washed over him.
He killed the pursuers and saved the kid – that was enough, right? *Right?* The rest would be up to Doc Glasses and his group of trained clowns. Up to the boss, if anything.

But the man handed him the child. She was still sleeping – sedated, likely; her skin had an opalescent paleness that made one wonder if she was alive at all.

Instead of accepting her, Chuuya looked for his phone and ferociously pressed the speed dial for Kouyou. If the guy wasn't going to cooperate quickly, he was going to need a medical

squad and a memory-extracting ability user, his brain yelled at him, *now*. Now.

“No. No way.”

“Th—"

“Just fuckin’ hang in there, okay?”

“There’s a rainstorm coming,” the man wheezed, eyes distant and glazed. “And when she—when *she—”* His eyes widened as he choked on a mouthful of spit and watery, pink blood. “Tell her I’m sorry.”

Quickly, nostrils flaring with the stench of death, Chuuya leaned forward. He grasped the child before the man’s unstable grip dropped her, and marveled at how light she felt; all bones and thin skin and buzzing power.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Kuraokami project,” the man stuttered. “An Ability-experimentation base—Research Facility E, in Osaka—”

“Osaka?”

“I couldn't let it happen any—more. It was cruel—”

Yeah, he thought, *tell me about it.*

"What were they doing?"

"A batch— failed the merging."

Chuuya leaned forward. "With a singularity?"

"We were burning them. I took the only one left, I had to escape. We— God save me, I killed them. I killed them all. Oh Lord, forgive me, I will meet them soon enough. And I will pay too."

As his jaw dropped slightly, Chuuya wasn't sure if he was supposed to laugh or cry.
So Army Guy had killed his friends and ran with the child. Was Chuuya's life a joke? Was it *funny?*
He expected a deserter, but he'd heard that story before: everything goes well 'in the name of science' or shit until someone develops a tiny crumb of *fucking* consciousness and everything blows up.

It was then that people started to die.

"I took the only one left, I-" The man’s voice drifted off, and the light winked away from his face. The thing about death that most books won’t explain is that it looked ridiculously like life, and yet entirely different; often it crept up in silence, unexpected. One moment the man was alive; the one after he was dead. Simple as that. *Useless* as that.

Cussing under his breath, Chuuya held the child. *Kuraokami*. A deity of rain.
No matter how many years passed, he supposed that the bastard scientists hidden away in their godforsaken labs never really lost their flair for names and legends: they turned normal Ability users into gods, and kids into monsters.

No matter that Arahabaki, Guivre, and Kuraokami were just humans, in the end.

Suddenly, as he cradled the girl's head with one hand and stood up, the bundle felt much heavier than it had done a moment before.

His arms closed automatically around the kid in his embrace, trying to shelter her, wondering why her white skin smelled so familiar, like... plastic, cables, and faux lemon and— *And.* Sterilized environments.

Right.

Neither water nor time could wash away the scent of Research Facility A and B, the subtle memory of it. Although any conscious memory had faded under the pressure of time, the ghost of the place remained tattooed on the forefront of the cerebral cortex.

He'd been tortured in N's laboratories before.

The battle he won in that place as a teenager — more than the memories hiding away in his subconscious — had branded him with the place's pungent scent.
Having your clone disintegrate in your arms at sixteen does that to a person, he'd guess.

A voice in his mind told him to let go and never turn back; he could call a squad and pretend the conversation never happened. Another voice told him that his blood might have been mafia black, but he was much better than that – it sounded annoyingly like Piano Man.

The child continued to sleep, barely wheezing at all, so still that Chuuya glanced down to see if it was a life-sized doll or a corpse. It was breathing, although only just.
Drugged, likely.

A fat drop of cold water fell on Chuuya's cheek – mixing with blood that wasn't his, and with sweat that stuck to his skin. It fell past the brim of his hat, and suddenly the roaring of a summer thunderstorm filled his head.

It started raining.

—

Ango had parked a child in the Agency's waiting room.

Dazai had to repeat those words to himself several times to make them make sense and, even then, he was not sure about how they had gotten to that point. Ango. The Agency. A *child.*
Rumors in the street had it that, lately, the yakuza had been hunting down a thief and a weapon – a couple worth billions in the black market, even more than the Ability-cutting Man-Tiger.

Now, once again, Dazai had several hypotheses — and no absolute certainty yet — on why the government had been involved in that issue. The local yakuza cells and the Special Ability unit did not normally cross over.

But, as everybody in the Agency had learned rather quickly in the span of a single morning, the little girl that the government had *somehow* acquired (if Dazai had to guess, this kind of job normally involved a child labor cargo intercepted by the Port Mafia) and entrusted into their care was not the usual day-to-day Agency's task.

She was a quiet child, first and foremost.

She sat on the couch, rocking her little feet as her head of short brown hair disappeared behind a copy of a tactile book that looked too big and grown-up for her.
Her black, shiny leather shoes — he recognized the brand from a shop in a street close to Ango's condo — didn't reach the ground. Although the tag with the price had been cut from the brand-new shoes, perhaps to throw them into an expense report that would have been ignored for months, her new caretakers had neglected to remove the sticker with the number from under her sole, which was plainly in sight every time she swung her feet. Government goons had always been flaky.

Dazai sneaked a look at the child from his table as he pretended to be typing, scrunching his nose.

She was five, according to her file. Female. Her name seemed to be Sonoko and, after all, her first name was the least important piece of information in those files.

Pillow Diaries, her ability, was a lullaby of blood; it could siphon moods out of people, reading their auras and extracting memories upon contact.
Mind reading. *Manipulation.* No secret would be too secret around a man-made weapon that could sense emotions and extract memories from physical contact.

Her Gift had been assigned artificially, combining her innate powers with an overriding ability from another individual – likely a clone. And it must have hurt, Dazai mused as he scanned her serene face, it must have hurt like hell. Children of that age were too young to know this kind of ache.

"How are you doing, princess?" He asked from across the room, prompting her to raise her head.

Now, at the ripe age of twenty-three, Dazai had no desire to know the reason why Tanizaki lifted his head at the word *'princess*,' too.
He was just going to ignore it.

Gosh, he didn't need to know.

Instead, he focused on the big beam Sonoko gave him, appearing from behind the book.
"H'm! This book is sooo interesting."

Dazai's smile softened. "I'm glad you're having fun."

"Dazai," Kunikida barked at him from across his desk. "Don't get distracted."

"I'm just making conversation with the princess, Kunikida-kun."

The answer didn't seem to convince his partner; yet again, Dazai had expected it. "Damn it, the *last* thing we needed was a child in this office; where the hell is Sakaguchi, now?"

"With the President," Ranpo answered. He stared at the child, eyes opening wide for a moment before narrowing into emerald slits. "How annoying."

“Kitty, can you read with me?”

At the child's request, Atsushi’s head perked up so violently that Dazai was sure he had just given himself whiplash. “Huh, you mean me?”

“Kitty,” she insisted, with a resolute nod.

“I’m not a cat.”

“I saw a cat,” the child replied. “In your mind. Behind you.”

“Ah? *When*?”

Quietly, Dazai and Yosano exchanged a glance as they remembered the exact moment when Atsushi had given the book to Sonoko, their hands touching, and the moment when she extracted everything from him. Ability, feelings, fears.
Unsureness slowly rooted itself in Dazai’s stomach, extending its vines to his muscles — turning them into taut knots of tension.

This was not good.

Not only such an ability was bound to drag both Fitzgerald and the Port Mafia to their doorstep, but this might have been the one mission they could not solve.
The one thing they could not do, not even as the infamous Armed Detective Agency, because how could *they* help? Most of them had once been children who lost their innocence too soon, washed away in blood.

And Dazai blamed it on his own childhood, on how his *own* Gift had been used by the thankless bunch he used to call family, but kids unnerved him.
Their impulses were unpredictable, and they trusted adults too much and they got hurt.

It’s okay. We’re just the human equivalent of a parking lot, now, Dazai reminded himself. *We’re just a temporary daycare.*

Ango had it all under control.

Ango would get this mini-ability user out of his hair, and everything would return exactly how it was before.

—

Sakaguchi Ango sat in a chair at the head of a long wooden table in the Armed Detective Agency.
His usually immaculate attire seemed slightly disheveled, hair tousled and glasses crooked on his nose, a tangible expression of the pressing matter that had brought him to the Agency.

A stack of documents rested scattered before him, their pages marked with annotations and earmarks that suggested the files had been thoroughly inspected. One looked like a file Dazai had seen before: a worn-out stack of documents belonging to the Port mafia.

Freedom was never free. It always came with a price.

He, more than anyone, knew that. Ango had bought that same freedom for a runaway executive four years before, erasing his crimes and cleaning his past. It didn't wash the blood off his hands, of course. It just made it invisible.

Ango's gaze, framed by his round-rimmed glasses, jumped from Kunikida to the other detectives who had gathered in the room. Ranpo. Atsushi. Finally, it landed on Dazai — for a long moment, heavy, deliberating the implications of his current task.
He tilted his head to the side, organizing what he'd gathered from the situation so far.
Dear ol' Ango was not one to seek assistance lightly but, if he had to take a guild guess, the circumstances left the Government with no other choice but to turn to their allies.

Ango glanced down at the stack of documents, his fingers tracing the edge of one page. "As I was telling your President, our department has recently come into possession of crucial information regarding a child—" He started, and an involuntary chill rolled down Dazai's spine. Dragged out. Hidden. *Slow.* "—A child with unique abilities."

"You mean an artificial singularity," Ranpo said.

"Oh?"

"Like the Port Mafia executives," Atsushi murmured. "Kyouka said her mentor was a singularity as well, and he was terrifyingly powerful."

"This kid is five, Atsushi," Kunikida said. "I wouldn't compare her to someone *terrifyingly powerful*."

"She comes from a laboratory in Osaka," Ango said. And Dazai didn't have to look at him to recognize that his friend's mind had flickered to another laboratory and to another man who was once a boy, and who used to be trapped in a never-ending cage of darkness. "We must provide temporary care and protection to this unique ability user — that is, the child that is currently in your office. Too many singularities have already been turned into assassins and criminals."

The room fell into silence, the Agency members absorbing Ango's words.
Ranpo leaned back into his chair, oozing casual indifference. His feet found their way to the armrest, a lightless gleam in his glassy green eyes.

"And why should *we* take her in?"

“It’s your responsibility, as one of the three pillar organizations.”

“It is? Your government friends *made* her. If anything, it sounds like we could spare ourselves a headache by turning you down.”

“Ranpo-san…”

“Ranpo makes a good point, actually,” Dazai offered. “Pillow Diaries is a classified Ability that, if used properly, could be used to bribe any politician in the world. Emotions and memories are scary little things, and mind-bending abilities like hers can be rather damaging.”

"The Port Mafia's kid," Atsushi echoed, sotto voce.
In his voice, Dazai could still sense the ice-cold fear of an encounter during a train ride turned into a long nightmare.
He didn't blame Atsushi for fearing Yumeno: recognizing their power wasn't a sign of weakness. It was sheer *survival instinct.*

"That." He nodded. "And, best-case scenario, the child out there comes with issues."

Ranpo nodded. “It might turn us into a target.”

“Not to mention that she’s highly rated on the black market.” Happily, Dazai grinned at Atsushi. “Higher even than our Atsushi-kun, here~”

With a shiver, Atsushi balled tighter onto his chair, hugging his knees. “Wow,” he said, although he didn’t sound amazed at all.

Ango sighed with the tired resignation of a prisoner walking down the gallow. “That is all correct— and it’s also why the government asked for the support of the two major gifted organizations of the region.”

Dazai’s eyebrows furrowed as he gauged the true stakes of the request.
What Ango was unfurling in front of them was a *captatio benevolentiae* if he ever heard one, and it meant trouble: the government never bothered with manners unless it was a bad deal for everyone involved.

“So you asked the Port Mafia as well.”

“We had no choice, given that they found her.”

Dazai hesitated.
That meant Mori knew about her — which also meant all his executives knew, Verlaine included. He wondered if Chuuya, too, had thought about Q and their cell in the basement.

“One might argue that it’s disgraceful how the Government keeps running to the mafia whenever it needs help,” Kunikida said, a hard edge in his voice.

“Our resources are limited.”

“So it’s fine to deal with criminals?”

That accusation shut Ango down for a moment, a grave expression on his face that said '*you don’t understand'.*
It was the same as Shibusawa; a sacrifice for the greater good. It was just politics.

It must be awful to be understaffed in a government office, Dazai mused. After the issue with the Hunting Dogs and the Decay of Angels, Taneda’s department finally dropped the facade and dropped the pretense that they were above dealing with the mafia.
They insisted it was 'for the sake of the city's safety,' and all the things the upper brass told itself to sleep at night.

“It’s just temporary,” Ango promised. He pushed his glasses up his nose, an uneasy tremor barely perceptible in his fingers — he would beg for our help, Dazai realized. *That* was going to be interesting. “Sonoko is a good child, and she’ll be out of your care before you notice it. Until then, I ask you to protect her and her ability.”

Dazai lifted an eyebrow.

Don’t let it get under your skin, Dazai tries to tell himself, it’s just a name. *Naming something doesn’t mean you must keep it.*

“Is Sonoko her real name?”

“We suppose so. It was assigned by proxy.”

“So she *doesn’t* have a name?” Kunikida asked, gaze nervously jumping between Ango and his colleagues. He became nervous and on edge, Kunikida, whenever he was faced with a child’s suffering. Funny, Dazai thought, for a math teacher who should have been used to that kind of emotion. He wondered if his partner saw a chance of redemption for the children he could not save, in that mission; he wondered if he saw their ghosts whenever he closed his eyes. If they haunted Kunikida like Odasaku's ghost followed Dazai.
And, with every passing second, Kunikida had begun to realize that they were dealing with a child – someone who was innocent, and who never asked for a Gift. Someone who could be saved, the umpteenth victim of a city where power spilled all over the streets and painted the moon red.

“Lab rats don’t get names,” Ranpo reminded him.

“Text subjects in government laboratories were either kidnapped or sold to the facility, and have a number assigned,” Dazai explained. “Things like name and date of birth are assigned after — *if* — they make it to the outside world.”

Just like Chuuya.

“All the more reason to shelter her,” Kunikida said. “Before the Port Mafia lays its claim.”

“We *can’t* keep her," Dazai answered.

“What’s the big deal? If I recall correctly, you were decent enough with kids,” Kunikida reminded him, an impatient irritation seeping through his voice. Dazai knew the tone — he knew his partner like the back of his hand, and he was about to summon the President and let him call the shots. Whenever Kunikida let the President into a discussion, it was with absolute certainty that Dazai was going to be put back in his place.

Fuck.

His face grew cold, and he hoped it would be a decent mask to cover the void inside him.

“You don't know it."

"I saw it," Kunikida fought back. "During your entrance exam."

"The one from the flight?” He tilted his head to the side, a sneering laughter bubbling in the back of his throat. “She was a civilian kid. That was different.”

“And *this* is just a child we are talking about,” Kunikida reminded him, vehemently gesturing in Ango’s direction. Somehow, with a child just a door away, the whole conversation made Dazai feel like he was the one behaving like an unruly kid. “We can take care of her together. It doesn’t have to be a one-man assignment, but we are not leaving her to the Port Mafia.”

“Why not?” Ranpo said. “Mr. Fancy Hat is good enough with children, if you ask Kenji.”

He pretended the news didn’t surprise him. “Ane-San is also a good option when it comes to childcare.”

“Ozaki? How can you even suggest that, after Kyouka?”

“She cares for her protégés, and that’s all I know.”

“Dazai,” Kunikida called, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I don't know what's your problem today, and we can talk about it all you want. But, as a member of this organization, you should know we pursue the right path, not the *easy* one. And you are the best of us with children, so—”

“That's debatable,” He echoed, almost defiantly. Kunikida ignored him.

"—So, the least you could do is to step up and help out."

“Why should I get involved? Kunikida-kun is the one who’s dying to play house.”

“You’re being unreasonable.”

“Dazai-kun, you surely remember Od—"

“My, Ango,” Dazai interrupted, his lips morphing into a big smile. *Shut up*, his mind roared. *Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.* “You really never learn when to leave the past out of a conversation.”

Ango recoiled as if the words had stabbed him — and Dazai *hoped* his words had reached Ango's flesh where it was raw and soft, and he hoped they hurt. He hoped he had ripped Ango open just like Odasaku's absence tore him apart every single day. "My apologies," the man said, adjusting his glasses. "I was trying to make a point."

"I know exactly your point," he murmured.

He would know what to do, he tapped on the table, light as death, knowing Ango would hear the code and decipher it. *We don't.*

"Well. If we *must,* I guess we can become a parking lot for a couple of days." Ranpo relaxed back on his chair, kicking his feet up the table. "As long as it doesn't hinder my work."

Kunikida nodded. "Dazai, Atsushi-kun, and I can see to it."

"And I'll get some Ramune for your trouble."

"Why, Atsushi-kun, thank you~"

Ango lowered his eyes to the documents. "So it's decided. We will—"

That was when the door to the meeting room slammed open. Instantly, as the rest of the faces turned to stare at the newcomer, Dazai's lips retreated into a thin line.

"Yeah, I don't think so."

Enter the foe.

Although Dazai imagined the chessboard would get busier, the new presence still settled like a tiny, unpleasant thorn under his skin. He was expecting the entrance of someone from the Mafia, although the person who swung the door open *did* surprise him. Once he realized it was just a matter of time before the Port Mafia barged in, he fully expected Kouyou to take charge.

Instead—

"Chuuya-san?" Atsushi called. "What are you doing here?"

"Ha? I'm here for work."

"I texted him," Ango chimed in, lifting a hand. If nothing else, Dazai had to commend Ango for his ability to not blink under Kunikida's death stare.

"You called the *Gravity Manipulator,* out of everyone?"

"Yeah, and I bet Doc Glasses forgot to mention I was the one who found the kiddo," Chuuya explained, his deadpan gaze fixed on Ango. Dazai's eyes narrowed, squinting through the things Chuuya was not admitting — trying to pinpoint how, exactly, someone like his partner would end up just stumbling onto this particular child. Abandoned laboratory kids were not exactly something people *found* while on a stroll. "And she is like me."

“She’s a liability,” Dazai murmured.

"Boss doesn't think so, and you know where she comes from. You *remember* that place.”

"I'm not going to get you and your little group into another lab like N's, Slug; not this time." He stayed murderous under Chuuya's murderous gaze. He never desecrated their bond before, but *now*— now Chuuya glared at him, and Dazai’s refusal to help felt damn close to a betrayal.

“Every detail about the Osaka project is uncertain,” Ango jumped in, carefully, “and it remains to be confirmed. Even with the information provided by Rimbaud and the Port Mafia’s files, Doctor Nakahara’s team and his involvement in the Osaka experiments—“

“I wouldn’t continue,” Chuuya growled, pointing piercing ice-blue eyes at Ango. Eyes that promised retaliation as his voice dipped into a gravelly murmur: “If I were you.”

"But Dazai-kun..."

"Shitty Dazai *can* say certain things. You can’t."

Kunikida scoffed. “So we are going to do what, just leave a child with you? You’re a criminal.”

“On a security level, I’m the best candidate among the executives. We can’t afford a child to wander close to Ane-san’s brothels, Boss is already busy and, trust me, you don't want to leave a traumatized child with the bastard in the basement.” Chuuya tipped his hat, plummeting on a chair as if he *belonged* in the Agency’s office. The casual assertiveness of his gestures made Dazai wonder what his life would have been if he had chosen another path four years before. If he had asked his partner to leave with him. “Plus, my current house is already compromised. Dimwit Dazai breaks in twice a week, and I can’t seem to keep his cockroach self out — so, even if I were to accept a mission abroad, you lot are welcome to come to my place to look after the kid.”

He said 'welcome' in a tone that sounded more like ‘I don’t care if you do it or not,’ and the offer had nothing to do with hospitality and everything to do with a crude practicality.

“Sounds like a viable option,” Ango agreed. “As discussed, the only condition is cooperation with the Agency.”

“Boss briefed me, so spare the bullshit.”

As he stared at Chuuya crossing his legs with the relaxed demeanor of someone who was just taking on a mildly stressful part-time job, Kunikida’s eyebrows shot up. “Are you *that* relaxed about the enemy being in your home?”

“That’s just a house,” Chuuya replied with a shrug. “I have other safe places. I’m not that *unprepared.”*

“And is it equipped for a child?”

“I have a room ready for the mission and a fuckin’ home theater. Is *your* ratty dorm equipped for a child?”

Atsushi gulped at that, lifting a timid hand. “Is there any chance I can come too and help?”

For a long moment, Kunikida looked at the boy as if he wanted to smack him across the head with Doppo Poet’s notebook. However, when he lowered his head with a defeated sigh, Dazai couldn’t blame him. Assets-wise, the Port Mafia obliterated them. “Nice try, brat.”

Chuuya flashed them a smirk that was a brazen declaration of victory. Nakahara Chuuya loved to win, after all, and his out-of-scale ability accustomed him to nothing but deafening triumph. A little part of Dazai wanted to barf, but he forced himself to stay still.

So it was decided.

Executive Nakahara of the Port Mafia would take the child under his wing. It was a raven-like wing that filtered hardly any light, the capricious protection of gravity feeling arguably more like a cage than a shelter, but a wing nonetheless. The truth was that the Agency held hardly any leverage for a negotiation.
They had the personnel but lacked the facilities to host an unplanned child. Their dorm’s kitchen caught fire every two weeks; they didn’t have warm water on Saturdays between one and six in the morning (as Dazai discovered the hard way).

No: they never stood a chance.
In fact, Chuuya *offering* to take the child would smooth things out.

But, perhaps for the first time in the seven years of Double Black partnership, Dazai had no idea how things would unravel from that moment forward.

The child was a singularity.

Under all the nice words of integration and adoption, that is the beginning and the end of the matter: A1519, government-assigned name *Sonoko,* was a singularity not that different from Verlaine or Chuuya himself. Hence, of course, the similarly assigned Gov number.

Dazai was cloaked in the darkness of the empty room, leaning against the wall, *waiting*, when Chuuya stepped into the cramped Agency’s kitchen for a glass of water. He insisted on helping himself to the kitchen without bothering Haruno. So Dazai waited for his chance to get his former partner alone, waiting with the laconic patience of a wolf ambushing the sheep.
Even though he couldn't quite peek at Chuuya’s face from his spot behind the corner, resting with his arms crossed against the kitchen wall, he didn’t need eye contact to peek into his former partner’s intentions.

“Looking for something, partner?” He asked once Chuuya stepped into the room – voice sickly sweet but hard-edged.

He giggled under his breath when Chuuya practically flinched out of his skin, a dark joy waved into his tone.

“*Fuck.”* Chuuya took a sharp inhale, slapping a hand on his chest. Dazai didn’t miss how, for a split second, the man had charged a kick and recoiled as soon as he realized that it was *just* him, and that they were *just* alone in a semi-dark room. The odds could have been worse, for a fight. “Holy shit, I could've killed you. Are you insane, dumbass?”

“Very possible,” he purred, straightening up. His amenable act left a sour aftertaste on his tongue. “I do want to die, after all."

"Yeah, my mistake; you *are* batshit crazy."

"Maybe, or maybe not. Chuuya, on the other hand, is so tender-hearted I could cry.”

The executive scoffed, waving the comment away. “Oh, piss off.”

“Why?” Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “We both know you are not a philanthropist, so why are you doing this?”

"Like I said, it's none of your business."

"And like I said it is, if the mission gets assigned to both our organizations," he said. "It's not personal."

"It sounds like it, though."

"I am just wondering why a Port Mafia executive would meddle in a government's assignment."

After a moment of tense silence, Chuuya took off his hat to run a hand through his hair. He dragged a deep breath, Dazai’s accusation sinking in at last, and the detective caught a hint of honest vulnerability flashing across the man's eyes. “Look— I get that it sounds stupid, alright? I’m not a fucking saint, but I have my reasons.”

For a moment, Dazai was tempted to believe those words. Then, he remembered the prison. Chuuya was a great actor, and he craved a family.
Despite Verlaine and the Sheep, the executive's existence was a fundamentally lonely one: Dazai saw it in his eyes, he saw it in the way his former partner had thrown himself into the mission in an attempt to prove something to himself. "So, what are you trying to prove, here, exactly?"

He *saw* how Chuuya clenched his fists, the leather of his gloves pulled taut with the gesture. The executive wanted to punch the light out of him, but what was new about that? "Excuse me, asshole? I don't have to prove shit to anyone."

“Do you think you can help her?”

“I think I know what it feels like to be treated as a monster when you’re not even ten.”

Oh, Dazai knew it too.

“I’ll take care of it with Kunikida-kun. The Port Mafia doesn’t have to get its hands on yet another ability-wielding child.”

“The child may be a singularity, but I’ll see she’s not treated as such. Just because she was taken from her parents, we..."

"Right, and that's an interesting point since *you* never told me you went to visit your parents,” Dazai commented. He could *feel* the second of hesitation in Chuuya’s posture. “Really, Slug? I had to hear it from Akutagawa.”

“I had no reason to tell you.”

"Did you talk to them? Did it give you what you wanted?"

"None of your business."

“I could have been there for you.”

“You were *gone,* Dazai. And I didn’t feel like having a personal heart-to-heart when you resurfaced like the flip-flopping rat you are.”

Dazai’s eyes narrowed. “Is that it, is this some kind of hero complex? Do you feel responsible?” The words cut deep as he balanced them on the tip of his tongue — honed enough that they would bite, leaving scars. Just enough to earn a reaction, an explanation for something that did not add up and that, for once, Dazai couldn’t figure out. “Is it the Flags? Or do you feel like you have to make it up to all the *clones* that didn’t surviv–”

Before he was done talking, Chuuya’s fist fell heavy against the wall. Cracks opened across the white ceramic tiles, deep and violent. Although the hit didn't open a proper crater, with the executive returning mindful of his destructive power at the last minute, the collision made the entire building *shiver.*
“Shut your mouth,” he thundered, the violent rumble of a storm. “Lab kids help each other. Now shut the fuck up before I kill you.”

That doesn’t answer my question, Dazai thought, although he knew better than to insist.

Instead, all he could do was work out a plan as he listened to Chuuya’s footsteps becoming soft as he walked away.

—

Chuuya stepped into the Agency’s waiting room, his eyes scanning the cramped working space – clocking in the colorful doodles pinned to the Agency’s lockers and the wax crayons scattered over Kunikida’s usually tidy desk. In the past months, somewhat against his will, he had learned to know the Agency.
He recognized the scent of warm paper straight out of the fax machine (who still used a damn *fax machine,* these days?) and the smoky scent of tea leaves. The scent was green and yellow,

like a never-ending early summer mixed with cheap potted plants that somehow (thanks to Kenji) had flourished into verdant bushes.

And in all that reassuring normality, something stood out.

He'd read Sonoko's file like one reads a horror book: with goosebumps up his arms and putting the paperwork down every few minutes to remind himself to breathe. He read about her and saw himself in those words.

Spotting a small figure huddled in a corner, he made his way over to her.

Sonoko sported a bony body and a mop of messy, uneven hair. The previous haircuts were poorly executed, to say the least, and the invisible scars of the experimentation lingered in the depths of her eyes.
Her hair had been kept short (easy to dry once out of the isolation tank) and her nails were dutifully trimmed (it's not *pleasant* when an ability-wielding child claws at you in pain, fighting for their lives. Fighting for an *out).* And she was skinny, the kind of body of a creature who had been fed to survive and not to build strength.

'You looked like a scrawny animal,' Chuuya remembered Shirase telling him, 'I've seen stray dogs being less miserable, man. I could count your ribs.'

Despite the horror stories written and erased on the surface of her skin, though, she was playing with a toy car on the floor and only glanced up when she noticed Chuuya crouching next to her.

She quickly averted his gaze, cheeks tinted with a blush.

Chuuya offered a polite smile, though there was a hint of guardedness in her demeanor. "Ya having fun?"

Which– *yeah,* it was probably a bit too confrontational, considering how she recoiled. That was how he'd deal with the kids in the Sheep and it would work just fine: they'd become fast friends. There, feeling like a fool on the Agency's floor, he realized that *he* wasn't a child anymore.

He cleared his voice, trying to backpedal.

Fantastic job, Chuuya. What was that spiel to the boss about being spot-on for the job? Hitting the ground running? You fucking fell face-first without even trying.

"You are Sonoko-chan, right?"

The child didn't look up. "Ango-san told me not to talk to strangers."

…Right. Fair play, Chuuya supposed.

"I'm a friend of Ango-san," he echoed, having to will the words 'friend' and 'Ango-san' out of his mouth without retching.

Slowly, Sonoko glanced up. Her little limbs had the absolute quietness of the people who are used to staying still for hours on end, a heartbreaking fear drilled into her bones. “What’s your name?”

“I'm Chuuya,” he tried again, pointing at himself. “It's nice to meet you."

Sonoko mumbled a quiet greeting in response, returning to her toy car to avoid eye contact. *‘Meetchu,* she said, and that was that. She made the car swirl back and forth, never really going anywhere, never really taking too much space. With an empty room at her disposal, she’d only occupied a corner.

Chuuya reached out and gently looked over the car, keeping his movements cautious. "That’s a nice toy you have here.”

“Kitty-san gave it to me.”

Chuuya bit his bottom lip, stifling a sneer. No matter what, he was *not* going to comment on how the Agency’s weretiger had been demoted to a house cat. “Hey,” he said instead. “Wanna see it fly?”

She looked at him as if he’d just said something entirely dumb. “Cars don’t fly.”

“Not if *I* am around,” he said.

Sonoko’s lips curled into a hesitant smile as he finally mustered the courage to look up at Chuuya. "Really? You can fly?"

Chuuya winked. "Yes, I can. And I can make people fly, too."

“…Are you a fairy?”

“I’m someone who can play around with gravity.” Not that he expected a child to understand the concept of gravity, but people really needed to stop assuming he was a fairy. He gestured at the car. “Ango and the others tell me you’re special too.”

Sonoko’s smile faded slightly, sensing the guardedness in Chuuya's tone. "Are you a friend of Akiko-nee and Kunikida-san?"

Chuuya hesitated before answering. "Something like that, yes."

“I like it here,” she mumbled, reaching out to touch light fingers to the strip of skin between the edge of his gloves and his sleeve. “You're going to take me away. I don’t want.”

Pillow Diaries.
An icy shiver ran down Chuuya’s spine as the ability manifested itself – an intricate entanglement of vines latching onto his darkest, deepest secrets and sucking information out of him. Her file classified her as a mind-reader and a mind-manipulator, not different from Yumeno. And just like them Sonoko was *young,* and her ability was terrifying. They had lost Yumeno, somewhere along their training.

Dazai gave up on them or, maybe, with their ability, they had been too out of reach from the very beginning.

Sonoko was going to be different.

“You read my thoughts?”

“Only some of them,” Sonoko hummed, looking at the car. Back. Forth. Back. *Forth.* “I don’t like them.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he promised.

“I don’t know you.”

The matter-of-fact coldness in her voice made him falter. That tone was too old to belong to a child — it belonged to a feral animal. “What do you want to know, then?”

“H’mm,” she said, noncommittal.

“Look, kiddo, I *promise* I’ll keep you safe. And you can come to hang out with the people at the Agency whenever, yeah? They’re fun, I get it. I’m just showing you your new room for a little while, okay?”

She turned her head to the side. “My room? What’s that?”

“It’s a place only for you.”

“Like the tank?”

Chuuya shook his head, tugging a strand of hair behind his ear with uneasy fingers. Did they keep her in an isolation tank, too? God.

“No, it’s a good place. Somewhere when you can play and no one can tell you what to do.”

“Oh,” she said.

With that, Sonoko's curiosity waned as she returned to her toy car, pushing it silently across the floor. Chuuya watched her movements for a moment, still maintaining a reserved distance.

As the minutes passed, Sonoko slowly returned to her play – she sang to herself, too, and Chuuya took the chance to get up and head for the exit.
Although he would leave the detectives now to tend to Sonoko until the end of the working day, he was determined to see the mission to the end.

He owed it to too many people — and most of them were dead.

—

Chuuya's gloves didn't make any sound as he clapped his hands in the shrine.
That was how he learned that the best wishes were made in silence: because he did not make a sound, and yet he was sure Murase still heard him.

Chuuya had kept that surname: not the surname of the professor who made him into a weapon, but the one of the man who believed in him when he had nothing to offer.
And yet, once again, he couldn't escape that past, that blackness in his childhood that had ended up swallowing his adulthood.

Again, and again, and again. Cyclically, like a seasonal storm.

In those moments of chaos the wooden altar in front of him, weathered with age, and the solidity of the age-bent floor under his feet granted him an odd sense of reassurance. He summoned the memory of the night when he found Sonoko — no, *no*. Sonoko found him — and felt wetness inside his bones.

For once, as he inhaled the pungent reek of incense and clasped his hands in front of the altar, Chuuya was not visiting The Flags.

What he tried to remember as he closed his eyes and prayed hard was that he was not saving the world, this time; he was sheltering a child for a couple of months or so.
That was not going to be *that* difficult, was it? He took care of children before, when he was only a child himself.

"You'd be pretty proud of this, huh, old man?" He asked, in a hushed tone.

Nakahara Murase had always liked kids. He liked them enough to fight daily to drag the Sheep to school, and he liked them enough to be murdered by the King of Assassins for the leader of the Sheep.

"You were always so fucking annoying. Smiling at me like you knew that one day I would have thanked you for buggin' me every single day. Children shouldn't have to worry about life, huh? Gimme a fuckin' break."

And here he was, Chuuya: older, wiser, with more scars than ever but still worrying about putting food on the table for others. Still taking in children in the hope of making a change for the better. Still bathing in incense at the graves of the people he buried.

"Ya know, I kind of wish you'd be here. I don't mind taking care of her, but where do I even *start*? The last time I took in some kiddos, we both remember it didn't end so well."

I either fuck up or get everyone killed.

Perhaps, however, this time was going to be different.
A part of him hoped that taking care of another kid from his same hell would return him to a semblance of humanity. 'Do you see, brother?' he would say to Verlaine, 'That's how you treat your so-called family. Not slaughtering their friends and turning their lives upside down.'

“Nakahara-dono,” the voice in his earpiece croaked, interrupting his musings. “We’ve got the kid.”

For a second, flashing a glance to the altar, Chuuya smirked.

Murase would have accused him of being blasphemous, bringing earpieces and mafia gear into a shrine. ‘Doing your shady job while praying for a good man’s death,’ he would have said, ‘unbelievable’. Which was funny enough, considering that Chuuya’s life *was* his job and Nakahara Murase had been killed for it.
He clicked the earpiece shut and swallowed, breathing in the scent of incense.

He bowed deeply, hair falling over his forehead, and then adjusted his hat with one last glance at the altar.

“See ya, old man,” he said.
As he offered a silent prayer and walked out of the shrine, he could swear someone was laughing at him. Not maliciously, but the kind of tender laugh parents give when they finally notice their children have turned into adults.

“Oi,” Chuuya growled, eyebrows darting up as he bent over the backseat of the black car — sticking his head in the backseat to study the *mess* that was happening under his eyes. He balanced himself with one hand on the car’s roof, hunching over the back seat’s open door. “When I said 'pick up the kid from the Agency' I meant the actual *kid,* not the asshole who acts childish.”

Dazai was perched in the backseat of a black Port Mafia car, with Sonoko sitting next to him and occupying the seat further away from Chuuya. She had kicked her footsies against the back of the driver’s seat and was holding her backpack on her knees, playing with a loud Tamagotchi. The cheerful sounds tugged at Chuuya’s nerves. Or maybe *that* was Dazai’s fault.

The man sat all too relaxed occupying a seat and a half, legs crossed, looking like didn’t have a single care in the world.

“Chuuya~” he chirped. “Long time no see.”

His laughter was textured, almost touchable. It rolled down Chuuya’s spine like a warm, sticky drop of honey.

The executive’s hand balled in a fist as he reached out and grasped at Dazai’s collar, still holding onto the car’s roof with the other hand to balance himself. He didn’t miss the little *oof* that escaped Dazai’s mouth as he dragged him closer to his face. “What the *hell* are you doing here, asshole?”

“I’m Sonoko’s assigned detective!” He sing-sang, turning to seek Sonoko’s approval. “Isn’t that right, Sonoko-chan?”

When she nodded, a happy skip in her gestures as if she and her loud-as-hell Tamagotchi were going on an adventure, Chuuya was sure a part of him crumbled.

It wasn't *just* defeat: it was *dread* for what was to come.

Of course, Dazai still smiled like a child on Christmas Day even as Chuuya held him by the throat, his fingers sunken into the man's shirt. Hell, he was probably enjoying it.

"Dazai o'nii-san swore to protect me," Sonoko provided.

On cue, Dazai nodded. If the way Chuuya was holding him by the collar hurt him in any way, he refused to let it show. "Right! Kunikida says he'll pay me extra for the trouble."

Chuuya sneered, baring fangs. "Then go live with him."

"And he *also* said I could freeload meals at the Slug's lair! Mori-san agreed."

That Chuuya should have expected, with all Boss' blabbing about Dazai returning to the organization. As if anyone — Chuuya in particular— had ever asked for that troublemaker to be back. Hell no, sir; Chuuya was happy with his work now.

"I thought you made it clear that you don't answer to Boss anymore, ya hypocrite," Chuuya reminded him, voice velvet-thick.

"No, but I'll happily take his offer to be wined and dined on Chuuya's paycheck."

"Leech."

"*Shrimp."*

It took seconds for Dazai to wrap his slender hand around Chuuya's fingers, subtly encouraging him to turn the violent grip into a gentle hold. Even more annoyingly, Chuuya found himself *complying* with the gesture as if his body had responded to Dazai's vicinity.

He told himself he was not hurting Dazai physically only because he didn't want to traumatize a child — a child who, by the way, was too engrossed in her brand new Tamagotchi to mind them.

He scoffed and shoved Dazai back into the backseat with exasperated violence. Up until that point, their mouths had been too close for his taste; especially when Dazai was smirking like *that,* that smile that always went for Chuuya's jugular and threatened to rip it open.

No. *No.* Chuuya was far past letting people go for the soft flesh of his throat, where he was still tender and weak. He needed to follow his orders, and that was all.

"Suit yourself," he said.

Conceding victory was an art, after all.

—

He and Chuuya had kissed once.

They were sixteen, barely adults at all.
They'd held each other for a sliver of a second, the recent battle still imprinted on their lids and the roaring adrenaline rush altering their sense of humanity.

It felt like a fever dream, like something that was not supposed to happen — a torn line in the fabric of reality.

They were walking home from a mission in the countryside, the starry sky opening over their heads like a velvet blanket.

It bears explaining that, at the beginning of said mission, they *used* to have a car (which exploded, courtesy of Dazai) and they used to be provided with transmitters to call for a backup unit to clean up after the ruckus (which exploded, courtesy of Chuuya who forgot them in the car).

Hence, they were holding hands while walking down the countryside. Or, better: Dazai was clinging to Chuuya's hand while the other boy occasionally put up a half-hearted fight.

"Let me go."

Dazai shook his head, tightening his grip around Chuuya's fingers and squeezing –his partner's hands were soft despite the punches that he could throw, docile fingers that remained limp and unhappy in his hold. "If I let you go now, you'll act on your own and just *fly* home leaving me alone."

"Who do you take me for?! And, for the record, you *keep* begging me to leave ya here since you complain all the time."

"I don't complain *all* the time. Only most of it."

"Semantics."

"Did Chuuya learn a new word? Good boy." He pretended to pat his pocket. "Ah, I forgot the dog treats at home."

"HA? Fuck you."

Dazai ignored him. "Chibi is quite heartless, though," he said, puffing his cheeks. "Leaving your partner behind while you fly home? Have you no pity? What if someone sees poor-little-me — a sickly boy — wandering alone, and decides they want to pick a fight? That would be scary."

Chuuya quirked an eyebrow with a mixture of contempt and annoyance, and Dazai was suddenly *very* aware of the weight of his gun secured to a belt under his shirt. And the one strapped to his right thigh. And the smaller one around his waist.

"Right," the redhead growled, all but impressed. "Poor little kitten."

“Did Chuuya just call me a kitten?”

“I called you a clown,” Chuuya volleyed back, a dark cloud flashing over his face.

The embarrassment was too obvious on his partner’s face – ‘*you do look like a cat, though,’* his expression said – and too boring for Dazai to address.

Most of all, being called a *cat* didn’t mean Chuuya found him cute: that would have been a senseless assumption, and Dazai didn’t like how his brain just jumped to that conclusion without reason. Chuuya’s stupidity must have been contagious.

His chest deflated with a sigh. “I hate walking~”

“Come on, you whiny fish. We’re almost at a gas station.”

“Oh? So I can set myself on fire?”

“So we can find a *fucking* phone.”

“Using the car as a diversion was a terrible idea,” Dazai hummed under his breath. The perspective of setting himself on fire definitely sounded better than walking all the way back to Yokohama.

“To be fair, it was kinda cool,” Chuuya admitted under his breath. “How you made the car explode and all.”

“Chuuya’s Gift is not too bad either.”

He didn’t miss how Chuuya’s chest inflated, pushing out with pride. He used to be fawned upon by the other Sheep members all the time, as Chuuya had confessed once, until his power had become a very convenient old news: useful, but not too awe-inspiring anymore.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Sometimes even a slug can be helpful. How surprising.”

“Don’t try to be smug with me, ya mackerel,” Chuuya replied. He jutted his bottom lip out, suddenly looking almost insecure under the shivering light of the stars — and Dazai could see the tenderness of the countryside mirrored in Chuuya’s gestures. Out of the city, the boy seemed less hard-edged too. “I’ve seen the footage from the security cameras from the last mission, and there was something I wanted to ask.”

“Sure, go on.”

“Was something wrong? I saw you were staring at me and your face was…odd.”

Dazai scowled.

He needed to confirm that Chuuya failed to notice exactly *how* he looked at him when no one noticed it, and debris fell from the sky and the battlefield was ablaze; the awe in that gaze, the

infatuation. “Odd how?”

“Like you were seeing me for the first time.”

The admission thawed a knot that had been tightening in Dazai’s throat.

Fine, he told himself. *That is a good answer. It could’ve been much, much worse.*

“It’s because Chuuya becomes interesting when he fights.” He flashed the other an impish grin, dangling their hands – still locked together – with mock childish enthusiasm. “For starters, you’re so messy and loud I don’t need a microscope to see you. And you don’t fuck up my plans! You’re such a good subordinate, like a faithful police dog, and that’s refreshing.”

“I’m *not* a goddamn subordinate?!”

“Right, my bad — you’re a sheepdog!”

“Shut the fuck up with the dog jokes or I’ll stab you,” Chuuya growled, and Dazai *smiled.*

“Sometimes, you‘re so useful I even think I might kiss you~”

Chuuya turned, wide eyes so blue that Dazai thought that he might learn how to fly just by looking at them. He stared at their hands, then at him, and – oh, Dazai thought.
Oh. Were Chuuya’s eyes always so big, so utterly cornflower blue? Were his eyelashes always so thick and curled?

Was it a trick of the stars that blinked at him, while they were normally hidden away in Yokohama’s busy sky?

Because, if Dazai had to be honest, those stars were nothing compared to the gleam of the eyes looking at him.

Then, slowly*,* a smirk twitched up Chuuya’s lips.

“Then do it,” he said, “coward.”

No one had ever called Dazai Osamu a coward before.
In hindsight, Dazai would tell himself that was the only reason why he allowed Chuuya to let go of his hand and reach for his tie instead, pulling him down and against his mouth.

That was how Chuuya crashed their lips together: because he wanted to, and because Dazai had taken the game too far.

Their teeth clacked as their faces bumped one against the other, a contact too rushed to be anything but messy.

Unlike everything in Dazai’s life up until that point, too, it was young. It was innocent, if a kiss could be anything as such.

He cradled Chuuya's face with hands that smelled like gunpowder and dust and blood, angling his partner's chin with a shyness that felt knew and exciting. He closed his eyes behind the bandages and, still, he could see stars exploding behind the darkness.

It never happened again after that night.

Actually, part of Dazai still wondered *how* it had happened in the first place, if not for his surprise and the adrenaline bleeding into his bones from the battle.

Neither of them ever mentioned it again, as if that hiccup in their normal bickering never happened. As if that change might have jeopardized the entire balance of their partnership.

On some days, even many years after, Dazai wondered why he never took a chance.
Why he never told Chuuya that almost-change haunted and scared him into immobility, incapable of making peace with the memory of that kiss.

But Chuuya obviously never gave it any importance because he laughed as they parted, and threw back his head, and told him '*See? Now you know who's the coward between us.'*

And, God, he was right.

Dazai *was* a coward.

Perhaps those words uttered by Chuuya were the real reason why Dazai had stopped himself from leaning forward and begging for more: that terrifying suspect that he was giving too much importance to something that didn't have any importance at all.

Chuuya acted as if he was sure Dazai would never pay much mind to what had happened – a joke, something neither of them had truly enjoyed. As if he didn't imagine Dazai would spend the rest of his adult life longing to know more.

And *now* Chuuya wanted to care for a child? What a farce. People like them weren't cut out to care for children, their hands too rough and their hearts too hardened to handle something pure.

Yet, as he followed Sonoko and entered Chuuya's penthouse with the carefulness of a lamb willingly heading to the slaughterhouse, Dazai caught himself thinking that nothing had ever truly changed between them in sever years. Even his partner's house was exactly as he remembered it.

Same faint scent of soy wax and lavender, same candles, the same shine on parquet floors that were seldom walked upon.

With a gleeful cry, Sonoko bulleted herself into the spacious entrance and squealed with her full lungs, seemingly unaware of the lavish decor.

"This place is as gloomy as ever," Dazai hummed, shaking off his coat and hanging it on the coat rack. Predictably, it cost him an elbow in the ribs from Chuuya.

"If you hate it so much, you could stop breaking in to steal my wine."

“I never said I hate it.”

The answer turned something off in the back of Chuuya’s eyes — a star shining bright before it burned down into nothing but darkness and dust. But the executive didn’t explain and Dazai refused to ask, allowing Chuuya to turn his attention on the child and rush after Sonoko. She laughed, and Chuuya kneeled to take off her shoes and scolded her about walking into the home without the proper care.

Dazai saw the executive’s smile shatter the second Sonoko raised confused eyes on him, tilting her head.

“What’s a home?” She asked. Dazai’s heart backflipped.

It took Chuuya a moment to rearrange his expression into a reassuring smile. A nostalgic one, too.
“You know,” he said, voice heartbreakingly sweet. “I asked the same thing to the friends who took me in when I was about your age.”

Hands contracting in the pockets of his trousers, Dazai schooled his face into a serene expression that had nothing in common with the whirlwind of emotions turning inside him.

Calling the Sheep *friends* was a generous leap, from Dazai’s humble point of view: they were freeloaders.

That boy, Shirase — *God.*

The easy nonchalance that Shirase proved while turning on his so-called friend, with no regard for the respect Chuuya had shown him? The *disrespect?* The audacity?
Dazai could have screamed.

The stubborn shrimp clearly saw things differently, considering the postcards from London religiously framed on the wall, but that was the slug’s problem.

Instead, Dazai loitered at the edge of the scene, taking in a side of his partners he never witnessed before. Chuuya was a naturally nurturing person; he was the people’s leader, which made him unsuited to guide organizations. His heart wasn’t abstract enough to embrace a hypothesis— it bled too much, it felt too much.

In a land of kings and monsters, Chuuya was the people’s man.

And Chuuya had built a home for himself, too. What an incredible act of courage that seemed to Dazai, who had escaped his family’s shackles to keep himself sane.

“—And ice cream,” Chuuya was saying. “The first thing I asked for was bread, but I have ice cream mochi in the freezer. Want one?”

“Ice…?”

“It’s cold and sweet. Have you ever tried it?”

Sonoko shook her head, but Dazai barely registered it. “Nu-huh.”

“Ah... it’s easier if I show ya, isn’t it?”

She beamed, eyes shining. “Yes! Thank you, Chuuya o’nii-chan!” she chirped, and her voice sounded euphonious around the name. Chuuya’s grin grew wider as he tilted his head up and thumbed at his own chest.

“Leave it to me!”

“Yay!”

“It’ll be the best ice cream mochi you have ever tried!”

“*Yay!”*

Oh, gosh, there is no need to get so excited about ice cream, Dazai thought to himself, his expression twitching into a smile. He liked to think it was the haughty, slightly annoyed smile of adults witnessing the idiocy of children. But, as he looked at Sonoko and closed his eyes, he realized he could not remember the last time he had been excited about anything.

“*—One?”*

Dazai flinched as he realized that Sonoko had crept up on him, tugging at his sleeve to attract his attention. His eyebrows disappeared behind his fringe, taken aback by how the attention had shifted on him; he was supposed to be a bystander, invisible and quiet and barely there. *Why* were people seeing him?

“What?”

“You want one, too?” Chuuya insisted, arching one eyebrow. “It’s an expensive brand. I’ve got a bunch of flavors as a present from a subordinate.”

Dazai scrunched his nose. “Chuuya sure is popular.”

“Stick to the question we’ve asked.”

Sonoko stepped away from him to have a better look at his face — her little nose up, eyes *huge* as she scanned into her aura and clashed against No Longer Human. The obviousness of how she relied on her ability — no hidden agenda, just pure practicality — sent a shiver down Dazai’s spine. Had they looked so innocent too, at one point, before turning into murderers?

Was *this* what Odasaku saw in the orphans, was this bittersweet warmth his invisible reward for saving the innocents?

“Dazai-nii,” she mumbled, “can you try one?”

He swallowed, tongue swollen and useless in his mouth. “I—”

“Chuuya o’nii-chan says ice cream mochi is tasty.”

“That’s true, they are very tasty,” Dazai agreed, as amiable as he could while still stuck in the odd sense of *discontinuity* that had taken over him. Trying to ignore Chuuya’s searing gaze on him, he looked at Sonoko from above with a forcefully relaxed posture.

He was twenty-three.

He was no one’s brother, no one’s father, he could barely take on the role of a mentor. And *yet—*

“You can share mine,” Sonoko offered.

—And *yet* someone was looking at him like he was a good person, now.
Someone who didn’t care if Dazai’s darkness spilled all over, someone who didn’t judge him for his inability to understand humanity.

“Ice cream sounds good, princess,” he answered, head dropping into a defeated nod. Ah. Beaten by a squirt. *Unbelievable*. “Thank you for the offer.”

So this was going to be a fight, he considered. A mission waltzing between the triggers from his past and the dangers of his present.
Pillow Diaries might not have worked on him, but he still had to fully pinpoint Sonoko’s skill in picking up the subtle shifts in expression and mood. She had been military trained, after all.

How bothersome indeed.

—

It had been decided that Double Black was going to present a united front for the Agency and Mafia.

Splendid.

It sounded easy — on paper, that was, because nothing was ever straightforward when it involved *them.* Chuuya had no intention of pretending otherwise.
Now, however, the arrangement presented a problem that tugged at his sense of practicality.

His house, a spacious one-floor penthouse that occupied the best and brightest place of a front-ocean building, had always been a solitary refuge.
He could fit an infinity pool and a hot tub on his terrace – in fact, he *did* – and he had a home theater and a wine cellar, but there was little space left for any new room.

Sonoko’s bedroom, a sun-drenched haven tucked away at the east end of the spacious house, used to be a studio. The floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked the Cosmo Clock 21, and the lights from the amusement park painted the walls pink and blue and yellow on limpid nights.

Ane-san had truly outdone herself, but that left out a fish.

Where the *hell* was Dazai going to sleep?

Chuuya assumed he would just fuck off to his dorm. He could deal with Sonoko and had taken all measures to make her comfortable, but why was *he* meant to shelter Dazai? He didn't have a pond to let the stinky fish swim in peace. Besides, not throwing the bandaged asshole out the *second* he made a beeline for Chuuya's vintage whisky had been an exercise in self-restraint.
Chuuya powered through it, mouthing to himself that he had orders to follow and a mission to see through.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a warm amber glow over the city, Chuuya found himself standing before the door to his bedroom, contemplating the options.
Option A: kill Dazai. Tempting, but bothersome.
Option B: find a way around this fuckarsery, rise to the occasion and demand a promotion afterward.

Spoiler: both options sucked.

When he returned to the living room, his scowl still firmly in place, Dazai was comfortably sprawled on *his* couch, holding a can of *his* beer and wearing fluffy socks that he magicked from God-knew-where, and Chuuya wanted to scream. Even worse, the child was nowhere in sight.

"The princess has gone to check out her new toys," the detective offered, addressing the question Chuuya had not yet asked. "You know, you've done a good job with her room~ I'm surprised, Slug. Your house is still tacky, but Sonoko's room is decent."

Chuuya scoffed and tilted his chin toward the entrance. "Door's right there. If you don't like the decor, you're more than welcome to help yourself out."

"Not going to happen."

"Then the next time I hear *one* piece of commentary, it's the window. Just warning ya."

"And I am just saying that your choice in real estate was always debatable," Dazai remarked, his amusement hard-edged and entirely unfriendly. That was the issue with Dazai Osamu: his mouth was spewing compliments, but his tone said otherwise.

"Don't get too comfortable, jackass. You're only here because I don't want to get an earful from Boss if I throw you out."

Dazai's grin widened, all big eyes and fake innocence. "Why, I'm hurt. And here I thought Chibi just couldn't resist my charming company."

"I'd rather be in the company of me, myself, and a bottle of wine."

"Kinky," Dazai purred. Rolling his eyes, Chuuya forced himself not to kick him into Uranus and ignored the comment.

“There aren't any spare bedrooms other than the room that will be Sonoko’s. So you'll have to make do with the couch or the floor — you can thank your boss for it."

“But that couch is short!"

“Sounds like a *you* problem.”

Dazai scrunched his nose, leaning against the wall with an impish grin on his face. "Don't be heartless, Chibi. I'm sure your bed is big enough for both of us."

Chuuya's cheeks flushed with frustration, and he crossed his arms. Yes, his bed was *big* – big enough to fit both of them comfortably without their limbs ever touching. No, he had no intention of sharing it. "Don't even think about it, ya ass. You'll sleep on the couch, and that's final."

Dazai's laughter echoed through the apartment, a maddeningly melodious sound that grated on Chuuya's nerves. "Are you sure you don't want to reconsider, Chu-uuu-ya~?”

“Ha? Why the hell should I?”

“The couch is an unforgiving choice for someone who has saved you from Corruption time and again," Dazai poked. “One might even call you thankless and uncooperative. We should be a family, after all.”

“I’d rather eat sand than have a family with your rotten ass.*”*

Dazai pouted. "Now, that is unkind."

"That's true, and you know it."

“And I wonder if all this hostility will be seen as a way to jeopardize the mission~”

Dazai stared at him with a mischievous glint, the honey-warm color of his irises almost bordering on a deep crimson. It reminded Chuuya of the man he used to know — the man who would kill, manipulate, and lie to get what he wanted.

Dazai Osamu, the demon. The Prodigy.

It wasn’t the first time Chuuya found himself at the receiving end of Dazai’s schemes, but it was the first time that he saw the demon prodigy wearing the Armed Detective Agency’s coat. And it *hurt,* for some reason that Chuuya couldn’t quite place. It felt like this newfound Dazai had just stolen something precious from the ghost of the old Dazai that lived on in Chuuya’s memory.

He saw Dazai’s lips curled in a sharp grin, and a pang tugged at his chest.

Still, his patience was wearing thin as he scowled. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

Dazai shrugged. "Nah, not really."

“Well, I’m going to sleep in my safe house. Ya can stay here.”

“Your closest safe house is fifteen minutes away without traffic, and flying here would expose your ability. What if we get attacked, or Sonoko’s Gift acts up?”

“You’re a fuckin’ nullifier. You can handle an emergency.”

Serene, Dazai offered him a smile as he sank deeper into the couch. “Why, sure I can. But I do wonder who’s going to report to Mori-san that you were fifteen minutes late because you’re too immature to share a bed with an old colleague.” His eyes narrowed, his voice dropping into a velvet-like murmur. “Unless there’s any emotional ties you’re not able to control, *partner.”*

Chuuya wanted to scream.

Fuck.

Although he wanted to argue that nothing about Dazai was stranger to him – not his breathing pattern, not his heartbeat, not his smell, not even that stupid fucking grin he was giving him right now – he had a point.

Fifteen minutes could save a life; it could lose it, too.

The worst part of Dazai bribing him was knowing that the man had a good reason to do so.

"Ugh, *fine.* I guess we can give it a try."

Dazai grinned, mirth blooming at the corners of his voice as he let out a curt laughter. How unfairly warm that chuckle could sound, and yet Chuuya had learned a long time before that Dazai’s core was cold. How could he laugh like *that?* Who gave him the right? "Excellent choice. And if you want to get creative with our time…”

“Ha? You better stay the *fuck* away from my side.”

“What if Chuuya comes to cuddle on my side?”

Oh, Lord.

“I assure you I won’t. But if you try something funny, I swear to god that I’ll cut your tongue,” he hissed, one hand meaningfully running to the knife strapped to his thigh. A menacing, rounded growl rolled out of the back of his throat as his fingers brushed the hilt. “And only *then* I will cut your balls. Get close at your own risk.”

Unfazed, mask still perfectly in place, Dazai winked at him.
“As you please.” It sounded like ‘you’ll change your mind’. And, damn, Chuuya had a hunch that he was going to be right. “I promise I won't hog the blankets."

Although Chuuya scoffed, he found himself unable to relax. It wasn’t exactly Dazai’s fault – yet it was *because* of Dazai; the man’s proximity unsettled him.
It turned wrong into right and stupid into tempting.

And sleeping with Dazai of all people, of all *men* —

Gosh, Chuuya thought, plummeting on an armchair the second Dazai waltzed to the bathroom to take a bath.

It was going to be a difficult mission.

Weak and weary

Chapter Summary

Mission 1: *Wait, are we married now?*

Or: Dazai finds out he would have been a good teacher and that his crush on Chuuya is not going anywhere.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They sat at the breakfast table, the morning sun filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the penthouse.

Yokohama buzzed under their feet, thousands of lives intertwining into a tapestry of stories. They all danced in the palm of the three pillar organizations, and Dazai knew his way around their politics.

Not a single person in the city suspected that their frail human threads would at some point become pawns in the hands of Dazai Osamu — former Demon Prodigy, current detective. Big brother, for a while and against his will.

They were all pawns.
Useful pawns on a chessboard, beaten pieces of humanity thrown inside the meat grinder of a city built on the bones of the war.
But this moment — sharing a table and a bed and a life with one Nakahara Chuuya, for example — didn't serve a purpose. It had not been cut and tailored to fit into a scheme.
It was just breakfast, and Dazai was not *sure* what to do with himself.

They nursed takeaway cups with elegant logos of a nearby café that the Agency could not have afforded even on a payday.

Anything with a French name in the area of Chuuya's apartment was likely either a tourist trap or fancy; Chuuya knew well how to stay away from the first and enjoy the latter.

Dazai, on his end, kept tracing the borders of the cream-colored cup — wondering with a tinge of amazement why Chuuya remembered his coffee order, and what it might mean. The executive had allowed him to sleep in his bed, sharing the same space, and didn’t stab him.

Nothing had happened between them, of course. Dazai didn’t need to be a genius to have predicted such an outcome, considering Chuuya hated his guts and had plenty of reasons to do so.

And yet, for some reason he could not name, he found himself annoyed about being proved right. Throughout his life, he had changed a thousand faces but always had one heart — and that heart, rotten that it may be, belonged to Chuuya. It would always belong to him.

“In case you didn’t notice, your fridge is empty,” Dazai commented with a mischievous grin. He took a sip of the coffee. “Should I be worried that you’re trying to starve Sonoko?”

“We’ll get to grocery shopping when the kiddo wakes up.”

“But I’m hungry now.”

Chuuya raised an eyebrow, cupping the coffee with both hands. His knuckles were reddened. “Is this not enough for your spoiled ass?”

“Nope. I need my energy to defeat the bad guys~”

“The only energy you need is to run away from the women you have angered with your flirting.”

“Mean! I would never anger a beautiful woman.”

Chuuya *tch*ed. “Sure. I could name at least a dozen names.”

"I'm the perfect gentleman," Dazai said.

"You're *literally* the definition of 'everyone's boyfriend'."

…Well, Chuuya’s annoyance was probably *not* entirely unwarranted.
He had kept himself occupied with many lovers over the years, and most of those encounters didn’t end well; he’d lost count of the people he called ‘Chuuya’ on accident, too. He never regretted it, though — he never regretted the rare times he let himself lower his guard, hips pushing into a stranger’s tender body, and his heart spilled all over and his partner's name was the one that rolled out of his lips.

“Still, I’m hungry.” He said that only to divert the subject.

“Go buy yourself some breakfast if you want to eat something and the coffee is not enough,” Chuuya retorted, his tone laced with mock annoyance. The light of the kitchen in the early morning made his eyes shine brighter. “Or you have white rice in the rice cooker.”

"What about apples?"

Chuuya lifted an eyebrow. "What about them?"

"I like apples in the morning," Dazai explained. "In my region, there was always plenty of them — they were juicy and delicious, too. And local shops and neighbors would always make handmade cider."

"*Charming,"* Chuuya echoed.

“Des Chuuya have steamed fish for the rice? Some bean paste, maybe, for a toast?”

“What? Now?! That’s disgusting.”

“That’s a healthy meal,” he retorted, ignoring how Chuuya’s lips wrinkled and pursed at the request. He had such Western tastes. Dazai blamed Verlaine's influence for that.

“Well, then go buy some. Sure as hell I’m not gonna stop you.”

Dazai offered him a bright beam, lifting the paper cup to his lips and taking a little sip — just enough to wet his lips and realize that his belly had tangled up around the warmth of the coffee. Although he craved sweets and enjoyed teasing Chuuya about his empty fridge, his body reacted violently to the concept of eating as if the idea of introducing food into his system worked against his ultimate goal of letting himself die.

Too bad starvation didn’t seem all that endearing.

Still, he ignored the ominous feeling and kept on smiling. “Ah, but see, then I’d have to leave the comforts of your lovely penthouse.”

“What about you start working for what you want, then, for once in your mackerel-shitty life?”

“What about Chuuya tries out the thrill of doing something good and selfless, then, for once in his slug-silly life?”

Chuuya rolled his eyes, his coffee cup raised halfway to his lips. *God,* his eyes said, *it is way too early to fight with this bitch.* Dazai relished being insulted as such. “Don’t make it sound like I’ve turned my place into a five-star hotel for your convenience.”

Dazai leaned back in his chair, a theatrical sigh escaping his lips. He kept on moaning that he missed the privacy of his Agency’s room, but that was only partially true. Dazai had forced himself into self-imposed hells all his life, out of some sense of martyrdom Chuuya said he ‘didn’t begin to comprehend and didn’t mean to endorse’.

Perhaps he only felt human as the bitter coldness stung his bones, eating his soul away. He was satisfied only with brownish blood dried down his knees.

“Chuuya has a comfy place. The least I can do is to enjoy it fully, and honor Chuuya's hospitality.”

“This house’s not a fuckin’ inn and you were never meant to be in it.”

You were never meant to be my present.

Dazai shrugged and pretended it didn’t hurt. “And yet here I am.”

“For my displeasure,” Chuuya said. His voice was a low growl. “Unbelievable. You’re impossible even at a ridiculous hour in the morning.”

“Chuuya is just a grumpy liar who can’t resist my charming company.”

“The only charming thing about you is that you’ll leave.”

“Like I said, grumpy and a liar. I’m not going to leave.”

He could see Chuuya’s answer flashing across his face before it left his mouth.

“So you say,” the executive answered, “and yet you always leave.”

Yet you always leave.

Despite the accusation, Dazai didn’t answer. Chuuya saw him bend under the comment like a tree under the weight of the first snow. Although it was too late to take them back, he regretted his words in silence, kicking himself mentally for sounding so petty. For a second, he considered throwing the coffee cup at Dazai to distract him from the faux pas. He wasn't normally this careless with his words, leaving his emotions in plain sight.
Breakfast with a traitor was an unforeseen addition to his routine, and it clearly was testing his self-control.

Chuuya didn’t mind that Dazai left. *Of course,* he didn't.

They weren’t married or anything— they weren’t together at all when Dazai abandoned the mafia and waltzed to the light, or whatever idiocy he was spinning these days.

They were nothing.

They were…

…They were partners. God, they were partners, and they were closer than friends and bound to mutual loyalty more than any couple. And, yes, he was bitter that he had not been deemed worthy of a single good-fucking-bye.

Dazai-kun will become the next boss before he’s twenty-five, Boss said to him once.

As he gripped the cup, hooking his fingers around the paper, Chuuya struggled to believe that prediction. The more he looked at Dazai now, sipping his coffee as if the accusation had not touched him at all, the less he could picture it.

The man in front of him had changed so deeply that the old Dazai might as well have been killed in cold blood by the new one. Dead people didn’t come back to life. The old Dazai — the one Mori had great expectations for — was dead, and it had shed his skin for a new creature.

Here lies Dazai Osamu, was going to be etched into the grave of his old self. **Port Mafia executive. Might have become boss before turning 25.**

And fuck you, Mori.

—

As it turned out, Sonoko liked toy cars.

That was the reason why Dazai found himself sitting on the polished wooden floor of Chuuya's penthouse with an array of toy cars scattered around him. The coldness of the floor seeped through his clothes, trickling into his bones, but he hardly noticed the discomfort.

If it annoyed Sonoko, she didn't say.

She sat in front of him, her hands expertly maneuvering a miniature car along the floor while making noises that could either belong to a car or an angry kitten. He couldn't help but smile as he watched the scene, wondering when that enthusiasm would turn into disappointment and, eventually, anger. At last, she would spontaneously become distrustful of other human beings.

Chuuya had bought a new wardrobe for the little girl, and it was clear he'd put thought into the choice. The yellow sunflowers of the onesie suited her.

As Sonoko continued to play, her focus unwavering, Dazai decided to break the silence. He was a detective, after all. It was time to do some *detectiveing*.

"So," he began, "the lab. Can you tell me something about it, little one?"

Sonoko's gaze remained fixed on her toy. He couldn't blame her for acting stubborn, really, when he was trying to revive traumatizing memories.

"What was it like there?"

"…"

"Is there anything you remember?"

"No," she said.

"Not at all?"

"..."

"Sonoko-chan," he murmured, "I can't help if you don't let me help."

"Bright," she said, after a heartbeat of hesitation. "It was bright."

Bright wasn't exactly specific, perhaps, but it was a starting point that allowed Dazai to lean closer; he took one toy car, rolling its tiny wheels under his fingertip.

"Did you have a lot of people around?"

"H'm."

"How many?"

“A lot,” she said, low, “but always the same.”

“And how were they?”

“There were a lot of ghosts,” she mumbled. “They gave me toys and asked me questions. I played with a lipstick once. It was pretty and red.”

“That’s great,” he said, voice cautiously gentle. It wasn’t great at all, actually; greatly *useless*, that’s what it was. “Did the lady who gave you the lipstick have a name?”

Sonoko recoiled, closing herself into a distracted silence. The obvious reticence convinced Dazai to drop the ball, at least for the time being. Knowing the people who worked on the experiments, she must have been instructed not to reveal classified intel.

“So," he asked instead, "Did any of the ghosts ask you to use your gift on anyone willingly?”

For the first time, the child looked up at him, her innocent eyes filled with curiosity. They were as clear as polished glass, luminous beads of greens and browns, and became clearer with every passing day. “What does *williny* mean?”

Dazai chuckled, realizing he might have needed to simplify his questions for her. “I mean, have you ever used your ability on someone because one of the people in white told you to?”

Sonoko pondered this for a moment, her brow furrowing in thought. “I don’t like using it when it’s not for good things.”

“That’s a very kind way to use your gift, princess. It’s important to use your Gift to become a better person.”

Unlike me.

As the memories of his past crimes, the bloodshed, and the darkness he had been a part of resurfaced in his mind, a shiver shot down Dazai’s spine. Cold. Unmerciful. On the bleak floor, surrounded by childish toys, he felt the crushing weight of his guilt, of the lives he had reaped and the victories he had claimed in blood.

Was he a hypocrite, standing in the presence of an innocent child while his own hands were stained with the consequences of his actions?

Ango loved to throw Odasaku’s name around to convince him to do good, but the truth was that Ango didn’t know anything.

Odasaku would not have told him to adopt an innocent; he would have asked Dazai to back off. He’d been living in the darkness for too long.

And in all that, as he gently pushed a blue car in Sonoko’s direction, he couldn’t help but wonder if Odasaku would have been proud of the man he had become. The juxtaposition of his current life and his past was a heavy burden to bear, and it dragged him down and *choked* him.

After all, Chuuya said it: he was always going to run away.

Too engrossed in the movements of the red toy car, Sonoko only hummed under her breath and let the discussion fade away into a thick silence. Her small hands kept pushing the toy along the floor, seemingly lost in her world — a world where a fake toy car was much more important than abilities, schemes, and superpowers. Dazai envied that world.

What a luxury it was, to have her attention far more captivated by the miniature vehicle than by a conversation that could save lives.

“You need to be good,” Dazai insisted, not looking at her. It sounded weirdly dry, matter-of-fact. “Can you do it for me, princess?”

“H’m.”

“Can you promise?”

“I promise,” she hummed, shifting in place and folding her legs under her weight to sit more comfortably on the floor.

“And we will need you to be brave.”

“Who?”

“Me and Chuuya, and Yosano-sensei and Kunikida-kun. We are all trying to make you feel at home, but please excuse us for being boring from time to time.”

“Chuuya-nii is not boring. He gives me ice cream.”

“Is Kunikida-kun boring?”

For a moment, Sonoko seemed to hesitate. “A little,” she replied, eventually, and she had no idea how her answer delighted Dazai. He couldn't *wait* to tell Kunikida.

He couldn’t wait to let Kunikida know who was a decent babysitter and who was *not.*

When their cars bumped together, Sonoko giggled — and she looked so wild and brave, looking up to stare at him straight in the face with no trace of fear.
Most adults would not have the guts to do it, but such a small thing had no fear of facing him with a fire crackling behind her eyes. She dared to look the *demon prodigy* in the eye.

Her stubborn resolution reminded him of Chuuya; unnervingly, that was.

As if her filter had been shattered by the lab and experimentation. As if she had nothing left to be afraid of.

“I can be good,” she promised, with an enthusiasm that caused Dazai’s lips to curl up.

“That’s good to hear.”

“If I am, can I ask for something?”

He tilted his head to the side. “I suppose so, yes?”

Anxiety throbbed inside of the detective as he looked at the child, not expecting her to bargain.
What could she possibly want? If she had asked for money or presents, Chuuya could have taken care of that. But if she *didn’t,* then, what was he going to do?

Then, Sonoko got up and padded closer to him.

She wrapped tiny arms around Dazai’s neck and hid her face in his hair, and she smelled like strawberry cake and fresh cotton and crackling power.

It was a childlike scent, one that caused Dazai to wonder if this innocence would get beaten out of her because of her Ability. Because of her power. Being one of their kind was both a blessing and a curse, but Sonoko’s skin was warm, and her grip was unafraid, just like the one of any other child in the world. He remained still, but she did not move away.

She liked hugging him because Dazai’s skin ‘brought silence,’ she told Kunikida. No Longer Human quieted down her ability, although she was too young to understand it.

“Dazai-nii,” she murmured, her voice barely audible above his heartbeat, “you, and ‘Sushi-nii, and Chuuya o’nii-san too— If I behave, if I’m good, will you keep me?”

He remained moveless under her hug, not sure what would cause more damage: hugging her back and soothing her fears, or telling her the truth.

It was a brave question for a brave child. Dazai had no choice but to lie.

“Of course,” he promised. “Do you remember what Chuuya said? This is your home. You’ll stay here.”

He knew it wasn’t true even as she hugged him tighter; and it was never going to be true, but that was for the best: they all needed the intel, and Sonoko had to trust them to do her part. At some point, she would get a better family, a better future, and a fair chance at life.

They were lost, but she’d be the one to make it out alive.

—

So far, Dazai Osamu’s day had been a train crash.

Thanks to the Government and a half-an-hour phone call with Ango, he was in a terrible mood and late for work. He didn’t want to be productive, he wanted to sleep the day away.

The night before, Chuuya hadn’t shown up until the early hours of the morning (‘unspecified issues with a weapons shipment’ was the only intel Dazai managed to weasel out of the report Chuuya had left unattended for three seconds) and Sonoko had kicked her little feet into his lungs for the best part of the night after he allowed her to sleep in Chuuya’s bed.

Now, he felt barely alive.

The detective ran a hand through his hair, messy curls sticking out from all directions, and pressed his phone into his pocket as he walked into the living room.

It was quite the relief that Ango had taken care of enrolling Sonoko in a daycare for regular children, and was also looking into finding her an actual family, but *damn.*

First of all, as of today, he had something to tell Chuuya. Something not necessarily positive.

Second of all, Ango had blown out his brain with talk of paperwork. And more paperwork, and stamps and permits and proofs of Identity he unoriginally lacked, being a former mafioso and all.

'A birth certificate? Ask my father,' Dazai said, 'oh, right, my bad. He's dead'.

That spawned *more* paperwork.

Never in his life, Dazai would have imagined that finding daycare availability would have been this complicated. When he enrolled Chuuya in a dog daycare, it had been a matter of a couple of phone calls.

"Oi, Chibi, I—"

Then, Dazai stopped.

He gulped, too, and yet he found his throat had gone dry. He gawked. *This is heaven,* he thought. *No, wait.* It was *disgusting.*

(Or so Dazai told himself.)

Chuuya was running on a treadmill, shirtless, with Sonoko dutifully perched on the couch and stuffing her mouth with an onigiri. Apparently, children were supposed to get a second breakfast to keep their energy up. Funny how Dazai struggled to keep his first breakfast inside his belly without feeling sick.

"What?" Chuuya called, arching one eyebrow. He didn't stop and – Good Lord – he certainly didn't make the effort to wear a shirt to talk. *Unbelievable*. "Ya wanted something? Breakfast is ready and on the table."

"I—" *Come on, Dazai,* he thought, opening and closing his mouth. *You can do it.* "I called Ango."

"Oh? Doc Glasses' being useful or somethin'?"

It was frankly insulting that Chuuya hadn't slowed down at all to express his surprise, keeping the pace steady as Sonoko gobbled up the rest of her snack and sucked on her fingers with loud smacking sounds.
To Dazai, it was also insulting that anybody would willingly jog at seven in the morning without being either chased by a grizzly or completely insane.

“The childcare department has green-lighted our request for a spot in daycare based on our schedules. It’s the building close enough to the Agency.”

“Cool.” He flashed a smile in Sonoko’s direction. “Heard that, kiddo? You’re going to school.”

“Yay!” She echoed.

“Mini-chibi seems happy about it.”

“I told her she’d become a genius like Ranpo-san.”

“What? You should tell her she’ll become a genius like *me*~”

“I pray every day that she will never become as much of a pain in the ass as you.”

“That’s not very nice,” he said, scowling. “By the way, she’s been enrolled as Nakahara Sonoko. We’re both registered as her parents, and Ango pulled some strings to have a familyship certificate forged.”

That made Chuuya slow down, albeit imperceptibly. “So we’re what, *partners?*”

For the first time, Dazai felt the true weight of the word settling under his skin — partners not for work, but for *life*.

People who had chosen one another.

“That’s right,” he said, gauging every word with cautiousness. The last thing he wanted was for Chuuya to hurl the run mill at him for insinuating they might be newlyweds. “It’s the closest we could get to mutual custody, so no organization will have lesser control.”

“Control my ass. You’re just trying to piss me off.”

“I swear I would never willingly get into a civil partnership with a dog, but alas~”

Chuuya scowled. “I want a divorce. Now.”

“Ah, no can do. First of all, for a divorce we have to be legally married – and thanks, but no thanks. Second of all, I wouldn’t want to have issues if Sonoko gets hurt. I don’t want to get stuck with some troublesome paperwork issue while I’m simply dropping mini-chibi off to school—”

With more time, Dazai would have repeated to his partner the long list of reasons why going undercover as a legally registered family was the best choice for everyone.
He would have *explained.*

No one would have allowed Chuuya to single-handedly control Sonoko’s paperwork and movements, because Chuuya meant Mori and Mori meant *troubles.* Signing for a partnership at least gave Dazai some of the duties and rights of a parent: taking the child to the hospital,

accompanying her to school and meeting her after classes without the need to prove his identity.

Instead, he couldn't even finish the sentence that his stomach churned. The feeling of danger hit him like a punch in the guts, screaming at him to move away from Chuuya's trajectory.

Through Tainted, with a viciousness that Dazai could swear wasn't *there* a moment before, Chuuya hurled a pillow at him. The red light surrounding the object died the second it entered Dazai's space, but the object still had enough leftover propulsion to shoot right at Dazai's face.

The detective still grabbed it with his right hand just before the pillow hit him square in the nose – they had thrown at each other much more dangerous stuff than pillows – and, when he lowered it, he realized Chuuya had stepped off the treadmill.
His partner's (ah, that word again!) eyes were shining with an electric blue. Anger made his irises clearer.
And though he kept his heart shielded in bubble wrap, that kind of color always nudged at Dazai's edges.

"Look," Chuuya said. "You're annoying as shit as is and my day just got ten thousand times worse, so this was your warning. The next time you use mini-chibi, I'm gonna throw a knife instead of a pillow."

Nonplussed, Dazai tossed the pillow back onto the couch, and Sonoko laughed.

"Sure, *honey*," he said. "Keep barking, will you?"

"Ha?! Call me honey again, see how that goes."

Dazai grinned.
Something told him that Chuuya was going to throw the runmill at him if he pressed on the partnership certificate matter too much.

"Chuuya is as boring as ever, but that's okay. The last thing I want is to be killed by a shrimp."

"I'm serious," Chuuya replied. "You have no idea of what I'd give to cut you open."

Dazai had no doubt it was true.

He, too, would have been desperately curious to discover what kind of darkness was nestled in between his organs.

For all he knew, his insides were kept together by tar and blood – a thick, granulated, tainted paste that made him only just barely alive. His body was a broken clock. In truth, Dazai wanted Chuuya to stick a hand in his ribcage, close his fingers around the wet, pulsating muscle of his heart and squeeze it until it stopped fighting.

—

After Ango's connections enrolled Sonoko in a good school, it was time to get her up to speed with the rest of the children her age. The last thing Dazai wanted was for her to be left behind or be bullied, or *Chuuya* would have had to talk to the teachers.

The idea of letting Nakahara '*I will set fire to the entire school system if you look at my child the wrong way'* Chuuya deal with a class of nasty children didn't exactly tempt him.

The kitchen was bathed in the glow of the table lamp as Dazai sat with Sonoko in front of a colorful array of open books and scattered flashcards. She was chewing at the sleeve of her pastel orange sweater, eyes glazed by the effort and focused on the paper cards. Red for adjectives; blue for nouns.
They'd get to verbs in a lesson or two, Dazai announced.

Now, Dazai hated flash cards.

He found them boring and mechanical, and way too easy to remember. They weren't challenging or stimulating for the mind. He also learned the majority of complex, high-school kanji during the first year of elementary school, though, and Sonoko— *well*.
She was cute.
She was also well-behaved, and ate her veggies and followed Chuuya around with awe-filled eyes, repeating his words.

That didn't mean she wouldn't need flash cards (she did) as much as any other child (probably more).

She had scribbled her name on several pieces of paper, all in big colorful kana and wobbly kanji. She also doodled stars at the corners of the page.

Nakahara. Sonoko.

('That's Chuuya-nii's name?' She asked. 'It's pretty.'

God, it made Dazai want to weep.)

No one at the lab bothered to teach her basic kanji, which truly didn't surprise Dazai.

He pointed to the character on the flashcard. "What did we say about this one?"

She squinted. "H'm." Her voice became more resolute. *"Forest."*

"Right, that's good. And can you write it?"

Sonoko nodded and repeated the word, "forest," as she drew a little pyramid of three trees on the piece of paper in front of her.
To call the word approximate would have been an understatement— it was a bit *modernistic* to say the least. Abstract, even, but they'd make it do. She dutifully drew it twice. "It means three trees. One." She pointed at the bottom half of the kanji. "Two and three."

Dazai's lips stretched into a smile that was both encouraging and amused. That forest had seen better days for sure.

“That’s very good,” he agreed. “We need to work on the calligraphy, but you’re getting the hang of it.”

“The hang—?”

“It means you’re doing good, Sonoko-chan.”

“It’s easy.”

“Is it? Very well, then we can move to something more difficult.” He gently took the pen from her hand, tracing a kanji. “Try this one. Horse. It has ten strokes, like this—“

“Horses are pretty,” Sonoko offered, her gaze never leaving Dazai’s hand. He drew the kanji again, his elegant calligraphy ruined by the constant interruption to show the child every movement and every passage.

“That they are,” he agreed. “And if you squint, this word here looks like a pony. It’s easy to remember.”

“Where?”

“Here— see? The mane, and the tail, and the four legs to run.”

He saw the excitement bloom in Sonoko’s face as she could picture the animal in her head, following his finger as he pointed at the different strokes and numbered them. Her hands were small and so much softer than his own, hardened by the trigger and the blood.
A murderer’s hands.

But he was teaching, for once, not deceiving or lying or scheming.

In that moment Dazai realized that, in another life, he would have liked to become a teacher. He could share his knowledge, not *use* it.

Sonoko’s hands, so innocent, were the kind of hands Odasaku would have wanted to save — the kind of hands that never killed anybody, and that could still become anything she wanted. A writer, perhaps.

That was when Dazai noticed Chuuya.

The executive had been returning home during normal office hours, lately, early enough to spend time with the child.

Dazai had no doubt Mori was playing a clever game in the long run, hoping for someone (Chuuya, likely, or possibly Kouyou) to adopt the young ability user. That would grant the Port Mafia an edge and a new resource in one single, strategically flawless move.

Anyway.
Chuuya had been quietly observing from the doorway, his curiosity likely piqued by the study session like a stray cat sniffing some food.

He was leaning against the kitchen's doorway, arms crossed, and Dazai ignored his presence like one pretended not to notice the ghost of a long-lost lover: with every inch of his soul suddenly focused on the presence at the periphery of his sight. That was, until Chuuya spoke.

"Ya studying with the fish, kiddo?"

Sonoko nodded, although she seemed to digest the question only when she looked around and realized there was no fish in sight. "Where's the fish?"

Chuuya snickered. "Dazai's the fish."

"Said the slug with the tacky hat," Dazai mumbled.

"Are you going to help, Chuuya-nii?"

"He's a shrimp, princess. Shrimps are useless."

Chuuya ignored Dazai's remark, keeping himself at a safe distance. "Ah, I can try." He offered her a little smile – mellow and unsure as he rested his back against the wall and fidgeted with his gloves. "I never really learned this kind of school stuff when I was living in the streets."

Dazai took in the information and stored it away.
Any modern phone would automatically form the kanji from the kana, anyway.
In an everyday setting, Chuuya didn't really need to know the basics — he needed instincts and a specific set of skills and experience, but nothing more.

As Dazai had experienced first-hand, the executive was fluent in English, French, and Russian.
He knew the Western alphabet and how to carry on a successful negotiation and how to form a strategy, but there were *things* Chuuya didn't know. Things he never learned.

"You see, princess, Chuuya was busy being a king," Dazai offered, observing as Chuuya finally reached for the table and sat next to Sonoko. "Ne, Chibi, what about the reports these days?"

"I can read, you moron."

"Yes, but you used to need Ane-san's help."

You were fifteen and just off the streets. "Yeah, well, now I know the stuff I've gotta know. It's— ya know. The basic stuff." Chuuya shrugged. "I don't normally have issues and, if I have a doubt, Google is a thing. So it is what it is."

"I thought you were taking classes when you joined the Port Mafia?"

"Yeah, with the Flags - and I stopped as the workload increased. Boss said I was prepared enough."

"Ah."

“I kinda already knew everything, anyway. I’m a fast learner, and my stupid brother taught me French, too. He fuckin’ turned into the Duolingo bird to have an excuse to *bond,* that jackass.” Clearly, Chuuya wasn’t ecstatic about it. Dazai didn’t comment. “But some are just…stuff you learn in school and never use again, right?”

Dazai flashed him a hooded smirk. “Did Chuuya get bored? Was school too static for your dog self?”

“I was *old,* Dazai,” Chuuya snapped. “Let’s drop it.”

He frowned, but nodded. “I’m sorry,” he said.

He knew his partner was smart — genius, even. Just not educated.
Even if teasing Chuuya was fun, Dazai understood the frustration of someone trying to pick up the basis as an adult; it wasn’t a matter of intelligence but of *flexibility.*

“Well, there wasn’t much to do to begin with,” he added as the silence settled, waving it off with a shrug. “With that brain cell-eating hat of yours.”

Mechanically, Chuuya flipped him off — and *then* he stared at Sonoko with panic-wide eyes, and lowered his hand to hide a frustrated blush.

The second the child started asking about what the middle finger meant, and if it was a greeting and why Chuuya *felt* so angry, Dazai took the chance to place a flash card under her nose.

“Now, princess, time to get back to work. Let’s start with this one.” As he said that, he also placed a new flashcard in front of Sonoko. “What is this one?”

“Huh-uh. I know it.”

“Sure you do.”

“Is it flower?”

“Almost. If you add this other word, *ben,* it becomes '*petal'*. You see? It has 'flower', and the kanji for 'speech'. And this here—” he added another character "—This means flower garden."

And a garden reminded Dazai of his family’s home — the internal yards that opened on the tea pavilion, with the flowers and the fountains.
His parents forced him to take extra classes, and piano lessons, and calligraphy courses. By the age of ten, he was so accomplished he regularly beat his uncles at chess and go.
He was a token of a social power that didn’t truly *belong* to him: the second son, the politician’s legacy, the trophy. The monster.

A prodigy in a cage who, like a bird, was forced to sing the same cheerful song every day. Day in, day out.
He sang in the garden as winter rolled in; he sang as everything and everyone around him died.

On the other hand, just a chair away, gardens reminded Chuuya of freedom.

Nakahara Chuuya, the King of The Sheep, never learned how to read and write.
At twenty-three, he knew many, many things. He was a respected leader. But, every time he was reminded of the basic stuff he never learned, a burning flush crept up to his neck and cheeks.

Thankfully, it didn't happen often.

Piano Man taught him the basics during his first year in the Port Mafia. He helped Chuuya with vocabulary while Lippmann gave him English lessons between billiard games.

And Albatross brought snacks and Ice Man taught me Russian. We did that thrice a week.

Remembering hurt. It hurt more than dying, more than surrendering himself to Corruption.

No one ever blamed him for not being academically prepared: at eight, it was pretty much impossible to run an organization, learn how *not* to float while you sleep and pick up school work.
Chuuya had to suss out his priorities. Surviving had become the most impending necessity, and everything else came after.

Somehow, too, once Chuuya realized that he could take care of people without reading or writing much, he also concluded that teaching the younger children and bribing local headmasters to let the Sheep kids enroll in school seemed like a no-brainer.
It was too late for him, anyway.

People like himself and Yuan and Shirase had no time to waste in school, they had responsibilities.

Chuuya was a warrior. He would never become a lawyer or a doctor, he'd never be anything better than a violent king with a convenient power; everyone else, though, maybe had a chance to run out of Suribachi and make a splash into the real world.

His fate changed the day Dazai invited him to join the Port Mafia.

As he followed Sonoko's lesson with Dazai, Chuuya realized that he couldn't help much.

Annoyance built up in him with every answer he missed, frustration bubbling under his muscles, forcing him to move around every once in a while.

He bet that Dazai noticed how he distracted himself every time he could, bored to death by the things he already guessed and confused by the ones he did not know. Until Chuuya slumped onto the table, face in his head, ponytail disheveled into a loose mess for all the times he had run a hand through it, and all but let out a dramatic sigh.
"Shoot," he mumbled. "This dumb stuff is a lot harder than I thought."

"Brain-fried already, Slug?"

“Oh, shut up,” he growled, even as Sonoko reached out to touch his head. *She’s cute,* he thought, his tension melting like snow under the touch.
It was incredible that such a nice little girl could be of the same rotten, lab-made family tree that spat out himself and his asshole French non-brother.

“Chuuya-nii is tired,” Sonoko hummed, patting his head. “He wants to go to bed.”

“Hell yes, I do.”

Dazai flashed him a sly grin. “You can go to bed. That’s why you have an amazing partner to take care of things.”

“Huh? Where?”

“Me, of course~”

“Yeah. Sure. What I have is an overzealous stalker.”

Sonoko giggled, caught between the playful banter. All she could tell was that the bickering held no maliciousness, no true spite.

Chuuya too concealed a chuckle as he straightened up. Idly, he took a pen in between his fingers. It glowed a vibrant red and started floating mid-air — capturing an ‘*ohhh’* from Sonoko, but mostly relieving some of the tension off Chuuya.

Making objects flow felt like fidgeting: relaxing, mindless.

“An amazing partner, huh,” he hummed, without looking at Dazai. “You’re a goddamn curse, that’s what you are. Should’ve known you were going to become a constant pain in my—“ He stopped, side-glancing at the child to remind himself that ‘*pain in the ass’* wasn’t something he was allowed to say around her. Her wide eyes still followed the pen bouncing in the air. “—a thorn in my side, you fish.”

“Osamu-nii is a fish?”

Proudly, Chuuya nodded. “A big fish,” he agreed.

“Ah, Slug, you flatter me. So are you finally ready to acknowledge that I’m taller than you?”

“I said *bigger,* you fishhead.”

“Didn’t Chuuya want to go to sleep? Shoo.”

“Nah. I’ll stay here and spite you,” he declared. It didn’t sound so bad, after all.

Their occasional banter filled the kitchen as Sonoko continued to learn new words, flash card after flash card. Each correct answer was met with smiles and each mistake with a gentle explanation.

‘New,’ she learned. And ‘*warm’* and ‘*friend’* and ‘*work’*. ‘*Old’*.

If one asked Chuuya, ‘old’ was a funny term indeed. There was value in old things; there was beauty in them.

In front of that word, the executive remembered his old fan, the one Albatross bought for him during his first summer in the Port Mafia. It was old and over-used, and it buzzed loudly in Chuuya’s brand new Port Mafia-assigned apartment.

He never changed it.

Just because Chuuya had money, it didn’t mean he had to squander it on useless stuff to replace house appliances that still worked.
Things were not replaced easily once they entered his life. Chuuya got used to them quickly.

The truth was, he was a creature of habit.

He saw no reason to change the old fan.

Even if the object was slightly slanted to the side, and maybe it didn’t perform that well after all, it was something Chuuya cherished.
It worked, and that was enough.

It might not have been sparkly and fancy and new, and maybe sometimes he needed to trust that it wouldn’t just break and leave him in need of a new fan, but he was going to keep it until it broke. Until it died.

Old didn’t mean impossible to save and repurpose. Old meant cherished, lived-in, safe.

As he looked at Dazai, at his slender fingers and gentle expression while he wrote a kanji and showed it to Sonoko, Chuuya supposed he had applied that concept to his relationships, too.

—

“Dazai-nii, why are you sad?”

That was the first reason why Dazai didn’t want Sonoko around: children were much smarter than they seemed, and it terrified him. He didn’t dislike Sonoko or the idea of having children, but adults had failed him, used him, sold him; with no guide, how could he hope to do any better?

With an indulgent smile, he gestured for the child to make some space for him on the pink rug of her bedroom. As she scooted away, he dribbled the toys Chuuya and Kouyou kept piling in the room (Dazai religiously sent back the clothes offered by Mori, just out of spite) and sat cross-legged on the floor.

He dipped his fingers in the pastel pink rug, thick and fluffy, and mulled that it was everything he never thought he would see in Chuuya’s house. The thought made him smile. It made him think of another possible life, another life far away from the town that had chewed them and ripped them apart when they were kids.

And he remembered what Chuuya said – *'we are no good, but she has a chance'* – as Sonoko looked at him with eyes bigger than stars. They were just as luminous, just as innocent, and it squeezed Dazai's heart. He had seen too many eyes like that turn pale under his watch.
He remembered his own family using his Ability for money, exposing it to silent horrors and abusing it until something in Dazai just died. He was too young to just *die.* The first eyes that went pale were his own.

Finally, he smiled. "Why do you think I'm sad, young miss?"

"You feel sad," she whispered, offering him a blue crayon as she kept a red car. He wasn't sure what he was *supposed* to do with them. "It's your smile."

"People who are sad don't smile."

"They do. It's an ugly smile as if your eyes are somewhere else."

Ah, Dazai thought. Being called ugly was… new, he guessed.

He might have been immune to the siphoning power of Pillow Diaries, but it seemed that a child's keen eye — *or, well, Sonoko's finely honed senses and military training* — would always call him out on his bullshit.

Slowly, he put the crayon on the floor just to keep himself occupied with something. He wrapped his head around a possible explanation that a child so young would understand, tiptoeing around what he would normally say. He rounded his words so they wouldn't hurt, stones emptied and smoothed out by a gentle stream.

"You're very smart," he allowed, fighting to keep his voice leveled. "And you are also very right. But even if you notice things, you don't have to say them out loud, alright? Even if you're right, even if it seems safe—never, *ever* reveal what you know."

"Why?"

"Because bad people might want to take advantage of it."

" *Advant…* "

"Advantage," Dazai offered. "It means that they want to use what you know for themselves."

"Why?"

Exasperated, Dazai sighed and ran a hand through his hair. They were just at the second " *why* " of a seemingly long conversation, and he was already feeling his soul leaving his body.
"Because you are special."

"Like the person you miss?"

Ah. Shit. He shivered. *Now, this— he was so* not *prepared for this.*

He didn't *need* to ask her to know where Sonoko had met Odasaku: in Ango's memories; in Chuuya's, perhaps, if the Slug had been careless enough. So now he had nowhere to run, no way to deny it.

The child in front of him knew all of his deepest secrets without knowing him.

"He was a friend," Dazai admitted. The words pressed against the floor of his mouth, unsure, making him wonder if it was fair to vomit out his feelings now. Maybe he should just deny everything and say that it's okay. Maybe he should lie. Thousands of adults had lied to him before. "His name was Odasaku."

"That's a pretty name."

Somewhat, the comment stole a shiver out of him. "It is," he agreed. "He's somewhere else now."

"Where?"

"In the sky," he answered, slowly. His shoulders slumped. "I was thinking that he would have liked you, Sonoko-chan. He was a good teacher, and he liked children – he took care of some kids your age."

"Do they like Dazai o'nii-chan as well?"

"Huh," he said.

A better question would be: did they like me? Past tense. He corrected in his mind, his treacherous heart summoning the smell of smoke and burnt plastic from a car after an explosion. "No, princess. I never truly met them."

Odasaku didn't want him to get too close, and he had his good reasons.

The memory hurt, although Odasaku's cautiousness made sense.
It was one of the few adult things that truly hurt Dazai's childhood heart, one of the many things he should not have negotiated at seventeen.

'*You take care of a bunch of orphans? Sounds fun.'*

'Dazai, I need to ask you a favor.'

'What? Babysitting? Su—'

'I need you to promise me you'll never seek them,' Odasaku said. His expression was serene, but the simplicity of his words opened a hole in Dazai's stomach. *'The less ties they have with the Port Mafia, the better.'*

It was a boring request from an incredibly interesting man, but Odasaku didn't stop there. He beckoned the bartender and bought them both a whisky glass. The bartender left the bottle when Odasaku asked him to. *'I'm asking you this favor, Dazai, knowing what it might cost me. As a high profile member of the organization, you know better than anyone the risks of*

you meeting a bunch of war orphans – how quickly they become a liability, with the intel ending up in the wrong hands.'

Dazai hid behind a grin. He wondered if the man knew how hurt he was, if he could read it in the cracks of his lightless eyes. *'Why, isn't that a bit heartless? I'm your friend.'*

'And that's exactly the reason why I am asking you to help me, here. Because I care about you, and I know you'll understand.'

It was the only request Odasaku ever made to him.

Most of all, Odasaku said it as if he didn't want to be alone, yet there was nothing he could do about the situation. He trusted Dazai but didn't trust the organization they both worked for. It wasn't personal.

Life would later teach Dazai that heroes were always alone. Seeing men like the President and Odasaku taught him that.

"Dazai-nii?"

Sonoko's voice almost made him jump out of his skin. His heartbeat spiked in his chest, and then it started running.

"You know what, Sonoko-chan?" Dazai said, trying not to let anything show. "I can take you to meet him, one day. He was a very dear friend to me." Saying that, oh so very slowly, he took out Lupin's matchbox from his pocket, placing the object on the carpet between himself and the child. "He gave me this. Do you want to get closer and take a look?"

She crawled closer, wariness in her eyes. "What is it?"

"It's called a matchbox."

"This drawing looks funny."

"It's a thief," Dazai said. He smiled. "A gentleman thief."

"Oh!"

"The thief had a bad life, and he had to do things he did not like, but he also had no place he considered home. No one to call family. He was a lonely thief, you see."

Sonoko's smile turned upside down. *"Oh,"* she repeated.

"But he knew a hidden bar full of light and good music. And, in this bar, the thief had two dear friends. A home. And he was not as lonely anymore."

Humming, she scooted even closer to take a better look at the matchbox. She curled on herself like a little animal, one hand reaching out to touch the matchbox between them. "Odasaku-san looks happy," she murmured.

Dazai didn't ask what she was seeing. He didn't want to know what she was seeing. Slowly, careful as to not make it look like a rejection, he slipped the object out of her reach.

"He is—" His voice splintered. *Ah, fuck.* Why was his voice splintering? "He was a good man. I can bring you your own matchbox."

One without the matches, he added to himself, *the last thing we want is a mini-chibi setting fire to the entire house.*
Her smile opened again, peeking out like a summer day after a storm.

"Really?!"

"I promise. I will b–"

"Oi, Dazai."

The interruption caused the detective to flinch and turn.
He didn't hear Chuuya pad into the room, making him wonder just *how* focused he was on his own little pity party rather than being alert.
Splendid.
A scolding from Chuuya about children, graveyards, and leaving the mafia was the last thing he needed.

Dazai had no idea how much the executive heard but, considering the clouded blue of the man's eyes, it must have been enough to make a fool of himself.
He still made an effort to plaster a big smile on his face.

"Chuuya~! Welcome back."

"Come with me." That was the only answer. Leveled, stone-cold.

Dazai's stomach dropped as he glanced at Sonoko. Through her face and her Gift, he tried to grasp at Chuuya's emotional status.
Maybe he was a coward for using her ability as a meter to assess how worried he should be, but *hey* — at least he was keeping himself safe.

"How unsightly," the detective hummed, making a show of not moving a single muscle. "The dog is ordering the master around."

Chuuya raised a thumb behind his shoulder. "Now, dickhead."

It definitely wasn't promising.

Lips retreating into a thin line, Dazai stood up. He moved sluggishly, like a puppet being forced on its feet by invisible strings. Before stepping away, the brunet glanced at Sonoko again and stretched one arm to ruffle her hair. 'We'll be okay,' that gesture assured.
Or at least he hoped so, because Chuuya looked like he wanted to murder him and he had no *idea* why.

"We'll be back soon," he said.

“No,” and she smiled, chipper, “you won’t, but it’s okay.”

Dazai gulped, brow furrowing — okay, *that* was not good and rather eerie — but she only smiled wider and proceeded to ignore him in favor of her crayons. When he tried to swallow, it was dry.

Great, then.
He was about to be murdered.

He glanced at Chuuya, who only nodded and stepped out of the room. With a sigh, Dazai fixed the crinkles of his shirt, adjusted his bolo tie (Ah, he was just buying time, wasn’t he?) and slowly followed the man into the corridor. Remaining a few steps behind the executive, he didn’t close the door to Sonoko’s room as an insurance of sorts.

Just to remind Chuuya that, if he needed to spill blood, he was going to do that at the expense of an innocent.

Maybe it was cruel, but it was smart — just like Odasaku’s request. *Necessary*.

After all, Dazai had learned that Chuuya’s ‘discussions’ could always come with the tip of a blade in his body.

His muscles screamed with tension as he followed the executive deeper into the corridor, surrounded by a thick silence. He prepared himself to either dodge or bolt or fight.

That was, of course, *wrong*.

Instead, Chuuya turned and threw his arms around his neck, and Dazai’s breath stuttered as he was forced to bend to respond to his partner’s actions. His legs just reacted, lowering to accommodate what might have been mistaken for a hug (of course, it wasn’t a hug because that would have been impossible. Chuuya would never hug him).

It’s a way to strangle me, Dazai’s brain birthed first.

It was not that, though.

“I’m sorry.” It was nothing but a gruff whisper against his collarbone, and Dazai almost drowned in it. “I didn’t know. And I could never say that I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Wh—”

“You are not alone,” Chuuya said, his voice throaty and low against Dazai’s ear.

The tenderness of it opened a hole inside his chest, heavy and deep and bleeding. He made it sound so easy that Dazai scoffed a chuckle.

“What, now? Is Chuuya sick?”

“I know how it feels, and I know it sucks. It never stops hurting. So you should talk about it — hell, if you want to or if you *need* to, that’s quite the same. Me, your detective friends,

anyone."

"There's nothing to say," he argued, but it was weak and Chuuya ignored him.

"You have people around you — you always had. You're not stealing anything, and you're not on your own." As Dazai's mind wrestled that reassurance, arms limp by his sides and a throbbing heart beating in his throat, Chuuya hugged him tighter. "That friend of yours would be proud, y'know?"

He belonged somewhere.

He made it.

How absurd the thought seemed, even as Dazai crumbled into pieces in the safe cradle of an enemy's arms. He hugged Chuuya back, hands quivering. He allowed his words and hands to heal his loneliness, just for a moment. Just for now.

Because there was a part of the story he didn't tell Sonoko:

'The lonely thief had two friends, yes, but also a partner. And the thief loved his partner very much.

He loved him more than anything else in the world.'

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! ❤️

Kudos, comments and feedback give me life, so let me know if you liked the chapter!

Once a Sinner

Chapter Summary

> “Are you asking me to leave for you?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Chuuya returned from the docks covered from head to toe in a thick layer of dust and grime, every inch of his body was screaming. It screamed for relief, and for *sleep*.

Even carrying around his bones felt like a chore.

Every mission like this — the kind of night where he had to kill and not be killed — opened cavities in his humanity.

He let out a long, exasperated sigh as he entered the bedroom he shared with Dazai. He was so tired that he forgot to be annoyed at how quickly *his* bedroom had turned into *their* bedroom.

It happened out of convenience, an adaptation born from necessity.

Nothing romantic about it – nothing sentimental, either. Just two people sharing a mattress.

Still, as he padded into the room and slipped out of his clothes, Chuuya had to admit that it felt oddly familiar to go back home to someone.
Even if it was a fish, a traitor, and an asshole.

Even if it was *Dazai.*

The detective was a presence made of soft-lined shoulders and rounded angles and dark curls peeking from under the covers. Earlier that night, Dazai had reassured him that he would put Sonoko to bed and go to sleep, mindful of an early rise for an Agency’s case.
He also stated he’d leave a light on for Chuuya, and so he did.

“Ya know, I don’t need lights on,” Chuuya texted him back.

“*But it’s much better to return home knowing someone has left the lights on for you,”* Dazai replied.

That answer had cuddled up in Chuuya’s marrow, fuzzy and unexpected.
Just as Dazai had promised, the orange glow of a reading lamp cast a feeble light across the

room. It caressed the white drawer and mirror, casting dark shadows everywhere on Dazai's empty nightstand except for his red book on suicide. Chuuya had always refused to touch it.

When Chuuya padded to the bed, Dazai was already asleep.
Skin glowing red, the executive made his mass lighter. *'Be quiet now,'* he ordered himself, tiptoeing around Dazai's presence.

For a second, Chuuya allowed himself to fall into the domesticity of the situation – he fell *for* it. And he allowed himself to believe it was personal.
He imagined a world where Dazai was there *for* him, with no schemings in mind and no work involved.

Then he blinked and told himself he was a gullible imbecile. A tired imbecile, too.

He probably needed a shower, but he wasn't willing to risk falling asleep and drowning in the tub.
Instead he stripped down, remaining in nothing but a pair of clean boxer briefs (he would have cried if the blood had reached those, too. Wearing underwear sullied with *someone else's* blood was nothing short of disgusting) and told himself he would clean himself up in the morning.

The blood had seeped into his socks, though. Annoyingly, that was, because it was cashmere and now Chuuya would have to throw them away. *Fucking hell.*

He was pissed at the corpses.

He was pissed at the socks.

He was pissed at Dazai for looking like an angel when he was a villain.

He was pissed at himself because, as he slipped under the blanket, he couldn't peel his gaze away from Dazai's profile. The man had a soft nose and a strong jaw, and a mole close to the left ear – in seven years, Chuuya had never noticed it before tonight.

With a sigh, he flopped down on the bed. He sprawled out unceremoniously, making himself comfortable, the mattress just spongy and firm enough to sustain his aching muscles.

Dazai adjusted to the change and grumbled an incoherent tangle of words as his eyes remained closed, but his hands found Chuuya's shape through the darkness. Chuuya *expected* him to wake up.
He knew him too well.

Dazai had a habit of drifting in and out of a slight semblance of rest – he'd been like that since they were kids. Chuuya, in return, fell asleep the second he touched the pillow and had to *bribe* himself into getting up.

Now, though, they faced each other; both just barely awake, walls down, too tired to pretend.

"Rough day?" The detective hummed, his timbre so slurred that Chuuya had to guess *what* he was asking.

"You have no idea," he muttered. His own voice came out in a barely human sound.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m alive.”

“Wounded?”

Chuuya shook his head. “Nah. But I don’t want to see a corpse ever again,” he said, closing his eyes. God, he sounded like a child.

Dazai chuckled under his breath, stretching his legs, his shins brushing against Chuuya’s toes. Only the warmth of his partner’s skin made the executive realize how *cold* he’d been up until that point.

“Then maybe you should consider a career change, partner.”

“Such as?”

“Maybe an office job. A garden gnome. A pet slug. Or the Agency, who knows?” The touch of his limbs ghosted over the bare surface of Chuuya’s body as Dazai shifted closer, fingers gently carding through copper strands. For a second, too tired to push him away but awake enough to register the unspoken offer, Chuuya wondered what Dazai saw while handling him like this.

Was it a traitor, or was it a *partner?* Was it a fool he could win back and drag to the Agency? Maybe, he was just reading too much into Dazai’s usual annoying words.
It was a stretch to believe Dazai saw him *at all.*

“Are you asking me to leave for you?” he murmured – barely a whisper, too afraid that someone might hear him. Too afraid of the voice screaming ‘*do it, do it, do it.’*

“If I am, what would Chuuya say?”

“Well, I would say it’s bold of you to tell me to leave *for* you when you couldn’t be arsed to ask me to leave *with* you.”

Dazai hummed and ignored him together with the unspoken accusation. "You know, they say the best way to relax is to have a warm, caring woman by your side,” he said instead, his chanting voice sinking deep in Chuuya’s half-relaxed muscles. After all, he thought, he was glad Dazai had changed the subject; it was easier that way. “Not that Chuuya would appreciate it, since he’s a loner."

Chuuya cracked open an eye and turned his back to Dazai, now staring at the wall, and considered sleeping on the couch. *Or* punch the bastard’s head in the wall. Maybe that would finally shut him up.

"I'm not in the mood for your nonsense," he said.

I don't like women and you know it, don't you? Lingered on the tip of his tongue. But he never admitted it openly, not to Dazai.

But the other had already curled closer, pressing their bodies together. Chuuya's spine to Dazai's chest.

He placed an open hand on Chuuya's back, palm and all: right between his shoulder blades, fingers so featherlight they made him flinch. "You're tense, Slug. What happened out there?"

"I told you."

"You told me nothing of value. You'll just toss and turn all night, if you go to sleep like this."

"'Twas a bad mission."

"Want to talk about it?"

The question sent a shiver down Chuuya's body. "Not with *you."*

Once upon a time, they used to discuss missions for hours on end; they went over every detail at the ramen shop close to the Chinatown area, and in their shared office and on Chuuya's couch in between rounds of video games.

They discussed strategies in stifling hotel rooms, twin beds facing one another.

But that was *then,* and things had changed.

"Come on, no need to be mean. We're bed buddies."

Oh, Lord. Chuuya stirred, slipping away from Dazai's space. "You hijacked my bed."

"That's not true, and you know it."

"How's Sonoko?"

"She's asleep," Dazai whispered. "We watched a movie and she fell asleep right away, drooled all over my vest, too. She missed you."

"I missed her too." *Ah, was it surprising that he genuinely meant it? "* Thanks for taking care of her today."

For a long moment, Dazai left Chuuya waiting for a remark on his 'terrible ineptitude' that never came. Instead, he started to run his hand through Chuuya's hair again, twisting lean fingers through red strands. "Maybe I *can* help you relax, you know. Seriously."

Chuuya grunted, refusing to muse on the dirty methods a notorious and unrepentant scoundrel (quoting one of the Mackerel's many one-night stands) could use to make anyone relax. It sounded lewd. Whatever joke Dazai was trying to land, the executive was too

exhausted to wrap his brain around the offer and its implications — especially considering that he lacked a few layers of clothes and a lot of his usual bite.

Still, he didn't pull away from Dazai's touch. He found himself sinking into the warmth of their blended bodies, in the way Dazai hooked long legs around his own. He sighed, the weariness of the mission slowly giving way to the comfort of being home, before turning to face Dazai again.

It wasn't *fair*.

The bastard knew how much he liked physical contact of any kind. He melted like ice cream whenever Kouyou brushed his hair.

With a contented sigh, Chuuya nestled closer to the man, his head resting on Dazai's chest. He decided that a second of weakness would not kill him. As he cuddled into Dazai's arms, he couldn't help but think that it must have been similar to the feeling of snuggling a teddy bear — something soothing, *comforting*. Sonoko had plenty of teddy bears. Chuuya never had one, growing up in the streets and all.

Raised in the unforgiving world of alleys and beggars, seeking shelter in the streets and raiding Port Mafia facilities to sell booze to the black market, he'd never experienced the simple comforts of a home.

He had raised himself for as long as he could remember.

There were no warm bedtime stories, no nightlights, and certainly no teddy bears.

When someone cried, Shirase gave them bread and made them smile. Cocky bastard, Chuuya thought, with no bite and plenty of fondness. Shirase had always been good at making people laugh. 'We're lucky,' Shirase used to say, 'we don't have much, but we are a family.' Occasionally, Murase would sneak them food and books too.

Soon after, Chuuya's ability had turned the Sheep into a rich organization.

How odd that falling asleep in Dazai's arms *now* made him remember all the things he'd never had in his childhood. He closed his eyes, focusing on the steady rhythm of Dazai's heartbeat echoing in his own body.

It was a soothing, hypnotic sound; a slow ballad of humanity. He did not doubt that Dazai was *controlling* his heartbeat too, pacing it to match how his fingers worked through Chuuya's hair, but he had no intention of complaining. Its steady drumming made Chuuya wish for something huggable to chase away the fears that still haunted him after a mission.

Maybe, he thought, Dazai could be a teddy bear. An opinionated, lanky, all-edges-and-bandages teddy bear.

As he basked in the warmth of his partner, inhaling his scent of clean soap and gauze and *sea*, Chuuya pushed closer. In response, Dazai's lips brushed ever so softly over his forehead.

There was a certain light to the detective's eyes.

His lips continued to skim over Chuuya's forehead and hair, filled with a tenderness that the executive could not place. That he didn't *want* to place.
And every word was a balm calming the sears on his skin, and every caress regenerated his worn-out soul.

"It's not just Sonoko. I missed Chibi too, actually," Dazai said, voice a little louder than before, his breath fanning over Chuuya's skin. "Welcome home, Chuuya."

"I'm glad to be home," he murmured.

A pause, and Dazai's hand skimmed down Chuuya's back as he rubbed his bare feet against the executive's shin. "It's nice, isn't it?"

The executive grumbled in response, non-committal. It *was* nice.
So nice, in fact, that Chuuya couldn't help but lean forward slightly, his eyes locking with Dazai's own, his face moving closer as if anticipating the timid press of lips that never came.

Dazai's irises had come alive with a thousand gold speckles, and Chuuya wondered why they'd been dancing that dance for years, losing and finding each other at every turn.

Did they really need an excuse to get this close?

Couldn't it be that they—

Perhaps, no matter how foolish it sounded, they *could*—

In that fragile moment, with their breaths mingling and their hearts settling into the same pace, Chuuya thought that maybe a kiss wouldn't have been so bad.

Wasn't a goodnight kiss something silly to wish for?

Chuuya's guard tumbled down, all his weaknesses bared by Dazai's expert hands as the detective bent closer to press dry lips to his forehead.
For a fleeting second, he wondered if Dazai would have kissed him properly if he had asked.

It had been a long while since the last time anything in Chuuya's life had been this innocent.

The thought teetered at the edge of his consciousness. The possibility didn't seem so bad, but he didn't dare give it a voice. Instead, he closed his eyes and allowed the warmth of Dazai's presence to envelop him as the other's fingers continued to run through his hair.

Every little gesture set a revolution in motion under Chuuya's skin, a mutiny of his heart.

He could not want it, but he *did.*

God help him, he did want Dazai — he wanted his closeness and his skin under his fingertips, he wanted his loyalty and his betrayals and his lies and his everything.

As he drifted into a timid sleep, Chuuya realized that he'd been clinging to his partner's clothes, knuckles tensed and reddened for the effort.

They fell asleep together and forgot the lights were still on.

—

Chuuya stirred awake with a leftover pain in his muscles welcoming him into a new day. The early morning light filtered through the curtains, casting a pale glow over the room.

He stirred, slowly becoming aware of his surroundings.

But, as he shifted, he realized that something heavy pinned him down — a bandaged, *annoying* weight that sent a wave of panic rushing through him.

Dazai was spooning him, arms wrapped tightly around his waist and face nuzzled into Chuuya's neck. He had his nose buried in Chuuya's hair too, warm lips and damp breath, holding the executive close to his chest as if he wanted to engulf him. Eat him.

It took every inch of self-control in Chuuya not to yelp. His heart raced in his chest, threatening to explode out of his ribcage.

Shit, he thought, as the memories of the previous night began to resurface; Dazai kissing his forehead, Dazai holding him. *Shit indeed.*

Yes, the mission was fucking with his head. Yes, he needed to get a *grip.*

The room remained silent except for Dazai's hushed snores, and Chuuya breathed in; and out. He commanded his pulse to stop running, but it only drummed faster in his ear drums and in his blood vessels. *Damn it,* he thought for the third time. He had crusty blood on his skin and an oversized octopus draped over himself.
He needed an action plan, holy water and a way out. Not necessarily in that order.
Chuuya closed his eyes, taking in the feeling of Dazai's presence, the warmth of their shared space.

"Fuck," he murmured, unable to move a muscle. "Shit."

A vague memory flickered at the edges of his panicked consciousness, something about their lips brushing together and a mission in the countryside — a moment of youthful kindness so out of character for them to make Chuuya blush.

He shrugged it away violently, willing himself to focus on the present.

Dazai, still snoring hushedly against his neck, complained in his sleep and pulled him closer.

For a moment, Chuuya's resolve wavered.

Panic welled up inside his stomach, blooming with fleshy petals that clogged his insides as he jolted.

It took all his self-control to extricate himself from Dazai's embrace, slipping out of bed with as much grace as he could muster while regretting all his life decisions.

He took a moment to glance out of the window, looking out at the dawn above the ocean. Suddenly, drowning seemed like a great option.

Then he padded through his penthouse, bare feet whispering on the polished floors. He stalked across the apartment for his phone, hoping that the call he was about to make would help clear the chaos in his mind.

When he dialed Kouyou's number, he braced himself for the earful of a lifetime. She picked up after a few rings, and familiarity washed over him. It steadied his heartbeat, too.

“Chuuya, what's going on? It's early.”

He took a deep breath, gathering his courage — praying he would still have a job and a *head* at the end of the conversation. He dreaded what he was about to say, and there was no *nice* way of saying it.

“Ane-San,” he greeted. Then, he melted into a sigh. "I think I might need to give up on working with the Agency.”

A moment of pause. *And here lies Nakahara Chuuya,* he thought, *slashed via phone by Golden Demon.*

“I am sure I misheard, lad.”

“The issue isn't the Agency as a whole. I can *deal* with them. But Dazai's stupid mind games — he's playing dirty, and it's affecting my focus.”

"You know that Dazai is part of the deal. Boss’ orders."

Chuuya hesitated for a moment, scrambling for an explanation that could be honest without sounding too lame (was that even a thing, though? He *was* a lame loser with a soft spot for a fish).

How could he explain it without earning himself a bullet in the head, though?
Boss lived in the delirious fantasy that Dazai would stroll back into Mori Corp, eventually, and take the lead of the mafia. Somehow, Boss was also convinced Chuuya would be the one to lure him back.

How that could ever be possible remained a mystery to the executive, who had seen Dazai leave repeatedly after every mission that was *supposed* to make him stay. He had seen Boss fail and couldn’t say anything about it. Yet, he was always the one who lived that refusal on his skin.

As if keeping an old partner around and offering him an empty chair would ever change Dazai’s heart — a heart that was filled with Oda Sakunosuke’s legacy. A heart that still bled, and that would never forgive the mafia for killing the only man Dazai had trusted.

The friend Dazai had loved more than anyone.

Chuuya was never— *that.*

He ran a hand through his hair, somewhat more exhausted than the night before. “It’s just that Dazai likes to fuck with me.” *Oh, Lord, it sounded wrong.* “I mean. I’m not fucking Dazai, obviously. Clearly. I would *never*. It’s that Dazai’s being a pain to work with.”

He heard Kouyou clear her voice, which was never a good sign. “That hardly sounds like news.”

“Don’t I know it,” he growled, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Lad.” Chuuya’s shoulders stiffened and, without wanting it, he bowed at the phone to signal that he was listening. He wasn’t going to like it, was he? “Be honest: is Dazai hurting you?"

What she meant was if he was being manipulated, or blackmailed and whatnot.

Which was almost offensive, but not *impossible;* the Demon Prodigy had his ways of getting intel, and they were all as dark as sin. Some of them came dressed in shiny lies, too: betrayal wearing the mask of love, sexual interest, or friendship.

And they both knew there was no love lost between Dazai and the Port Mafia. He owed no loyalty to Chuuya.

Chuuya paused, grappling with the complexity of his feelings — what he knew about Dazai, and what he didn’t know about *himself*. "I don't know, Ane-san.”

“Try to explain,” she said.

“He’s different. It’s not just the clothes. He’s helpful one moment, and the next he shifts into another bloody mask, and I…Ah, I can't tell if he's just playing another game.”

Kouyou paused for a long moment.

She paused so deeply, barely breathing at all, that Chuuya almost thought he had done something wrong, that his words would somehow cost him more than he was willing to give.

Wasn’t that always the case, with Dazai? He took and took and took from him and never answered for it.

“Oh. So it’s that,” she said.

“That *what?”*

She hummed, ignoring his question. “I’m afraid I can't tell you what's in Dazai's mind, lad. No one can. But I can tell you this: when he left the organization, he left you behind with the rest of us. Your former partnership is leverage for the Boss and the Agency's President, not something you should live by. So *you* can’t allow your heart to trust him.”

And yet I do trust him and I don’t blame him for leaving, Chuuya thought. But he could not say it, could he?

“Right.”

“You work together, so do try to be professional. However, he is an Agency member now: keep in mind that he has no reason to respect you, or be cooperative, other than the immediate goals of his new organizations.”

He wetted his lips. “Is it what you tell yourself about Kyouka?”

“It is.”

“It's not fair. You care about her.”

“And nonetheless they are gone, lad.”

Chuuya's heart sank. He had witnessed how much the woman cherished Kyouka, then, and could hear the crack in her voice now.
He knew his sister meant every word, and most of all, he knew how that loss *destroyed* her.

But, after all, who would decide to wander back into the darkness after a day in the light?

Chuuya remembered the moment Dazai had left the Mafia just as clearly. Mori had questioned Chuuya's own devotion, then, and everybody considered it inevitable.
An executive first and foremost, Chuuya didn’t fight that decision. He underwent an interrogation.
He cried and bled to prove his fealty.

It was his family asking, and he would always answer.

After that, Mori made him *look* for Dazai. Not that anybody had expected him to succeed, but failing that task had been humiliating and exhausting at the same time. The lower ranks whispered that he didn’t even try. *I did,* he wanted to scream as he walked down the corridors, strangers' eyes burrowing into his back. *Fuck, I truly tried to find him.*

But Dazai didn’t want to be found.

It was like being cut by a thousand rusty nails, the pain lingering under the surface of Chuuya’s skin. He felt paper-thin under the rainstorm that Dazai left behind – cold loneliness and hammering regret. His chafed heart breathed with his pain. To this day, a leftover of that same ache refused to fade.

“Lad,” Kouyou called, and it surprised the executive enough that the phone almost slipped out of his grip. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded, voice heavy and heart *heavier*. "I just need time."

Or maybe he needed a drink. The world had heard about liquid lunch, but Japan was about to learn about liquid breakfast. Cereals and wine sounded good. Minus the cereals.

“Boss and the Government are pleased with your efforts," Kouyou said. "Don’t run away from it because of Dazai. That’s exactly what he wants.”

Frustrated, Chuuya glanced at the bedroom's door. *Dazai* was in there. He understood that Kouyou was trying to push him; she had done that since the beginning, and that kept him alive.
Yet, now, her encouragement felt insulting.

“I’m not running anywhere, Ane-san.”

“You’re adapting to Dazai’s tune. You’ve always done that.”

“That’s not fuckin’ fair.”

“What is it that stops you from pushing back when he pressures you, lad? You’re gravity. Why do you *bend* for a man? ”

He shivered. “I don’t bend.”

“Then prove it.”

Right, he told himself. *Right. You’re an executive of the Port Mafia, Chuuya. You know your value. Don't let an asshole manipulate your feelings into thinking you’re less than that.*

“I *know.”*

Fuck, he felt fifteen all over again. Being pushed around by Dazai and scolded by Kouyou because of his lack of spine around a manipulative snake; what a *fucking* throwback, indeed. Not that he had missed any of that — another testament that gravitating around Dazai made a fool out of him, whether he wanted it or not. He could never win. He didn’t even *want* to win.

Kouyou’s voice turned to a gentle angle. “—Lad, you need to forget about any emotional implications. Our priority is to keep the child safe.”

Chuuya bristled. He was never one to back down from a challenge, especially when it was something he had picked up voluntarily and involved an innocent— but *this?*

This was getting painful for all the wrong reasons.

"It's not that simple. Dazai—"

"Chuuya,” she cut him off. “I understand it’s difficult, but you know better than to let personal matters interfere with your work. Or am I wrong?"

“Maybe I’m not cut out for this mission. I get too attached.”

“Nonsense,” she said, her voice sharp, and he wanted to curl up and die. “You are more than qualified to carry on this mission. Never doubt it.”

Chuuya clenched his jaw.
He knew Kouyou was right, and unluckily such recognition didn't make the situation any easier.

"I understand," he finally conceded, the weight of his conflicting emotions pressing down on him.

As his finger hovered over the "End Call" button, his hand trembled slightly.

I should leave the mission, his brain screamed at him. *I might be disappointing Boss, but at least I'll be okay and away from Dazai.*

His shoulders tensed as if he were bracing himself for a storm rumbling ahead, as he remembered that Dazai never wanted him on the mission to begin with.

What a *shitty* scheme.

Chuuya closed the call, but insecurity still gnarled at him. The muscles in his jaw twitched with tension.

His gaze darted around the room, unable to settle on any spot, as if Dazai could show up at any moment and call out his failure and laugh at the tsunami of emotions beyond his control. He needed to pace, to exercise, to sweat out the conversation.

Too bad that in the Port Mafia, there was no 'I'm not cut out for this mission'; he had to rearrange himself, mutilating his soul to tailor it to the job. Chuuya knew that from the start.

And he had to protect Sonoko. *Duh.* But the struggle remained carved on the back of his eyelids as he closed his eyes and saw Dazai. He heard his voice saying '*Chuuya, welcome back! How was your work?'* — and how deceivingly kind did it sound.

How easy it was to believe it.

"Fuck," he said to the empty room, to the silent phone. *Fuck.*

—

"Good morning~"

Morning in Yokohama always brought a brisk wind that sliced through the streets.

Inside the Armed Detective Agency, work was in full swing when Dazai walked into the office, his trench coat slightly billowing as it followed his movements. He opened the door with a dramatic swing of the door and no true intention of working.
Sonoko held his hand.

She kept his fingers firmly in her grip, a pink backpack slung over her shoulders with the bento Dazai had bought for her. The lunch plastic box sported a cutesy Cinnamonroll pattern with blue bubbles, so it must have been for kids, right?

(God, he *hoped* so.)

"Ah, Dazai-san," Atsushi called out, his anxious voice turning dulcet as he recognized Sonoko's presence. "Sonoko-Chan! Hello!"

“Dazai, you waste of bandages, you are f–” Dazai grinned back, relishing how Kunikida’s brain hit the brakes mid-sentence.

Fucking late, huh? That was ungenerous. He was merely fifteen minutes later *than* usual. Kunikida halted the second he recognized Sonoko’s presence, loudly gulping down the rest of the sentence.

Dazai lowered one hand with a grin, ruffling Sonoko's hair.
After a few weeks of coexistence, he still marveled at how she cocked her head to meet his hand halfway rather than turning away from his touch.

"I’m taking care of her for the day,” Dazai explained. “So the princess will be keeping us company."

“Chuuya-nii is eepy,” she explained.

Dazai felt something inside him melt like snow in spring. *It was adorable.*

“Right. We let Chuuya sleep this morning,” he explained, awfully aware of the wolfish grin that was painting itself on Yosano’s lips. “Chibi’s exhausted, so she is going to stay with us today.”

On cue, Sonoko strolled to Kunikida’s desk and bowed up to him. “Good morning, Kunikida-san,” she greeted, ever so polite — and Dazai had a hunch she was *scared* of the man, with all the yelling and Dazai loudly complaining daily about ‘Kunikida-kun being mean’.

Maybe, though, Pillow Diaries had just picked up on the nervy anxiety oozing from the man (which would have been, again, Dazai’s fault).
He owed his poor partner a drink.

Still, Kunikida could not help but return the smile Sonoko was giving him. "Good morning. How have you been, little one?"

"Good.” Her voice was small but sweet, after taking a moment to carefully dissect Kunikida’s question. “Happy.”

Dazai’s heart sang. Kunikida glanced at him too before dropping his head in a nod. “That’s good.”

“Dazai-nii reads me stories."

Kunikida’s brow furrowed. “Are they age-appropriate?”

“Huh?” Sonoko echoed. The puzzled confusion on her face stole a giggle out of Dazai.

Snickering, he led Sonoko further into the Agency’s workspace, feeling an unusual sense of belonging as he strolled with the little girl by his side.

Sunlight flooded the Agency's light walls, casting a warm glow over the familiar surroundings — the tables, the scattered paperwork and folders with classified intel and

documents on a range of cases, the plastic plant Dazai had managed to trick Kunikida into watering once a day for two months.
For once, the space felt more like a regular office than a battleground.

Haruno handed Ranpo a bag of chips. *Bribery early in the morning,* Dazai thought, *that looks about right*.

Sonoko left his side to rush to give a gentle tug at Kyouka's red kimono sleeve with her hand. Then, she offered the older girl a cheeky grin before running back to hold onto Dazai's leg.

He couldn't shake off the warmth of Sonoko's hand in his, and the feeling of safety in having the child around. The domesticity of it all. The '*Chuuya-nii is eepy'* and the '*we decided to let him sleep'.* It all made him smile, an unguarded warmth blooming in his belly.

Once at his desk, Dazai handed Sonoko a bunch of rainbow pencils and a stack of coloring books from her backpack. Chuuya bought everything.
He watched as she eagerly flipped through the pages, her little face lighting up with excitement.

Yosano smirked from a few desks away, crossing her arms to her chest. "My, my," she purred, eyebrows disappearing behind her fringe. Her butterfly pin caught the sunlight. "You sure can deal with her, Dazai."

"I am a man of many talents," he said. He didn't think much or it, the casual flirting accompanied by the usual smirk.

"I'm surprised. It's almost as if you have a heart hidden somewhere."

"Does it make you want to consider a family with me, Yosano-sensei?"

"Ah, sure." She scoffed a chuckle. "And why would that be? Because you're good with kids? Plenty of men are."

Dazai's lips pinched up, his attention only half-focused on the discussion and how it monopolized the office.
"I assure you, sensei, that I have many other talents," he said, plastering one hand over his heart. *Dramatic bastard,* a voice echoed in the back of his heart; it sounded like Chuuya.
"Deep within this handsome exterior lies a heart of gold, and a man who loves all women."

"Funny how we never met this person and are stuck with the bandaged trash," Kunikida grumbled.

"It's hidden away for special occasions," he answered, winking without missing a beat.

Yosano raised an eyebrow. "Special occasions, you say?"

"I can show you in front of a glass of wine~"

"*Pass."*

Ah. Dazai's chest deflated, defeated. Of *course.*

"Have you no mercy for a lonely man?" He asked — which was funny because he could already guess the answer. It was painted in Yosano's subtle smile, in the casual sassiness of her posture.

"Don't flatter yourself, Dazai. No matter how often you ask, we're never going to date."

"Oh, and why is that?"

She smirked, playing along with the banter. "Because, my *dear,* you might be a lover of all women, but I lack a couple of things you find attractive."

He pretended not to understand, keeping his tone light as his eyes narrowed into darker slits. He felt the weight of the entire office's attention on his back, trying to peer at his heart. The same one everyone thought had withered — and, on some days, Dazai *wished* it were. Everything would have been simpler.

"Oh? Do enlighten me, please."

Yosano leaned forward with a sly grin as if she was letting him in on a secret. She looked like a fox playing with the rabbit – taking her time to toy with him, teasing him. "Blue eyes and a certain control over gravity."

His heart backflipped in his ribcage.

"I'm afraid you've got it all wrong," he still answered, his cadence forcefully blank.

"Oh, have I?"

"Absolutely," he responded with a flamboyant smirk. *Yes, please, try to venture further,* every inch of his body said, *if you dare, that is*. "I have no such taste in men."

Yosano shook her head but caught the hint and dropped the matter.

What an insincere bastard he was — and how easily he could still shroud his heart in lies, if he needed to. His shield also served as an offense.
He preferred to keep his soft spots well-guarded, even from his closest allies. He trusted no one with his heart.

Especially when his ex-partner was involved, that was.

On the bright side, he could almost *feel* Kunikida having a meltdown at his desk. That was a nice way of starting the day, at least.

"Everyone, enough chit-chat," the man said, sounding slightly strangled. "We have work to do. Get to it."

Dazai whistled to himself and obeyed. Kunikida was right. They all had targets to meet, mysteries to solve, crushes on enemies Port Mafia executives to ignore. Happy enough with

the chaos created so far, with a theatrical sigh and an exaggerated slump of his shoulders, the detective dropped the topic and slumped into his chair.

Yosano was entirely, embarrassingly, *absolutely* right about his feelings. Ranpo had likely guessed it a long time before.
The rest of the office didn't need to *know* it, though.

It was helpless, anyway.

Dazai opened his laptop, gently ruffling Sonoko's mop of brown hair, snorting when she didn't even look up to acknowledge his presence.
He picked some more books from her backpack, too, scattering more colorful pencils on the table.

"I'll have to be boring and do some work, little one. You tell me if you want your juice and your onigiri, okay?"

Sonoko nodded absently, still focused on her coloring book. She was tilting her head left and right as she colored Cinderella's pumpkin a bright neon green.

Dazai couldn't help but smile as he watched her.

Maybe he *had* a soft spot hidden under the mountain of corpses he had accumulated, after all. Maybe, Odasaku would have been proud of him.

Maybe.

—

One evening, Dazai found Chuuya in an Internet cafe that advertised the cheapest rates in Suribachi.
Drugs and lewd noises from the nearby stalls, filled with strangers fapping to uncensored porn, came with the entrance fee.

He had seen worse during his Demon Prodigy days.

"This place brings back memories," he said, slipping into the cubicle like a shadow. Chuuya didn't take his face out of his hat, nor did he motion to straighten up from his chair. If Dazai hadn't known him much better than this, he would have thought the man was either dead or asleep — both more than possible in such a place.

He waited and smiled when a groggy murmur finally answered his comment.

"Does it, now?"

"Wasn't this the Internet cafe the Sheep used to sleep in?"

Chuuya let out a small sound from the back of his throat, his face still hidden in his fedora as if Dazai was nothing but part of the debatable design of the Internet Cafe; just background noise.

The Sheep used the building as an occasional shelter in the very first days, when money was still scarce and Dazai was invited to join the organization.

Nowadays the detective knew for a fact that, after a night-time job, when he needed grounding, Chuuya still stopped by to decompress.

“Yuan had bargained for a good price,” the executive murmured. “Sometimes, the ol' owner would let us stay for free. I hope Yuan doesn't need to come here anymore. I hope she has a good life now.”

“Have you tried contacting her?”

“Not everyone went through a whole Eat Pray Love phase like you did, shithead,” Chuuya answered.

Dazai scoffed at the coarseness of the answer. ‘No’ would have worked just fine.

“How many?”

“None of your business.”

“How *many,* Chuuya?”

People asked *“How many?*” to address all kinds of tough questions — how many years since we stopped loving each other? How many exes? How many months do I have to live?

Dazai was asking none of that.

He knew Chuuya would not have asked him to look after Sonoko for a whole night without a fair reason.
That was also why the detective had, in turn, left the child with the Akutagawa siblings: to check that a good reason wouldn't kill Chuuya, too.

Chuuya sighed and combed a hand through his hair. “Three,” he relented. “Three of my men. Good men.”

Slipping onto the floor and folding his knees in his arms, Dazai let out a timid noise. He relished how the harsh floor under his body grounded him.

It had been long since he stopped losing subordinates, but he remembered how he feared for the lives of his colleagues during the war against the Hunting Dogs.

In prison, he kept saying, *"I must save the situation at the airport,"* to Ango.

"*I know, Dazai-kun,*" Ango would answer.

Back then, Dazai had no idea what he could do — what was in his power, and what was in the hands of his colleagues. It was torture. It hurt more than a bullet in the head or a broken leg.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“Thank you,” Chuuya answered.

“During a police investigation, a few weeks ago, Naomi-chan got shot," Dazai began, his tone measured and his words carefully picked. "She’s fine now. But for a moment, I thought ‘*What if we lose her?’* It’s terrifying, so… I mean it, Chuuya. I *am* sorry for your loss.”

Chuuya's blue irises studied him for a long moment, searching for something deeper. Some kind of confirmation that his understanding was genuine, perhaps.

“It is kinda terrifying, right?” The executive eventually said. “When the gun goes off, and you don’t know who’s alive and who isn’t.”

“And you’re not eager to find out the body count.”

“Hell no, for sure.”

“Isn’t that interesting?” Dazai tilted his head to the side, leaning his chin on his knee. “Human beings are quintessentially selfish creatures but, in that moment, we can’t even be grateful we are alive. We’re too worried for our comrades.”

“How would you know?”

“The war against the Hunting Dogs.”

“I definitely remember you say you trusted your annoying detective friend.”

“And I was still worried sick for all of them,” Dazai volleyed back. There was no shame in admitting that.

Chuuya barked a crude chuckle. “Well, would you look at that? I thought *the* Demon Prodigy considered empathy a weakness.”

“I did.”

“And then?”

“And then empathy kicked me in the face,” he answered.

And then Odasaku died.

No matter how many years passed, that wound just would not heal.

It festered in the darker corners of Dazai’s mind, telling him to not get attached; warning him against ever losing anyone else ever again.

"You know, asshole," Chuuya said, his voice laced with frustration as he turned his hat in between his hands. Dazai saw him shiver. “After all, despite all the shit I gave you, I’m glad

you never got seriously hurt. You made me worry every damn day, and it was annoying as hell, but I'm happy you're alive." A sigh. "*Thank you* for being alive."

Pressing his knees against his body, Dazai let out a noncommittal sound.

His silence carried a hint of acknowledgment, understanding precisely the root of Chuuya's pain.

The executive had trusted him. He trusted him more than Dazai could imagine, more than he thought he deserved. He'd been a secret ally in Dostoyevsky's game, a mere cog in the grand scheme of their prison break, and Dazai knew the battle scars that they had acquired in France still ran deep.

Chuuya had been a pawn most of his life.

During their prison game, Sigma had not been manipulated; he had chosen to follow Dazai willingly, they had an unspoken understanding between them. It would have been *easy* for Chuuya to misread the situation and think he could be replaceable when, in fact, he was *simply* necessary.

"Come on," Dazai said, hopping up. "Let's go."

"Ha? Where to?"

"I know a sky lounge bar close to Yokohama Station." He wasn't going to take Chuuya home, for he understood that the executive wouldn't have wanted to be emotionally responsible for Sonoko now; not with Pillow Diaries ready to absorb his emotions. "You need to stop sulking, and it has a billiard hall you'll enjoy."

"Are you sure it's cool? It's enemy's territory."

"I'll get you some Premium Boss on the way. My treat," he countered.

In all those years of partnership, he had memorized the map of the vending machines in the area and Chuuya's habits like the back of his hand.

He knew the executive needed a can of black coffee to ease his nerves.

"Osamu."

His own name sounded foreign as he halted, throwing a glance behind his shoulder.
No one ever used his name but Chuuya and the ghosts in his head.

"Yes?"

"Although I am glad you are back, I don't need you in my life. Letting you in is a choice, not something I owe you," he said, stalling by the door. Dazai was surprised by the smirk that bloomed on his face against his better judgement — at how his lips curled and his heart closed around the admission that Chuuya had missed him too. If they could still talk about

what had happened between them in the past, maybe then they could heal. “And I don't need your pity.”

“Trust me,” Dazai said. “You don't have it.”

—

Chuuya discovered that the problem with dealing with a loud, spoiled, whiny child became all the more evident whenever it was time to go grocery shopping.
Thank Goodness, Sonoko was happily playing with her Tamagotchi while sitting inside the shopping cart, perfectly behaved.
The *overgrown* child, on the other hand…

“Chuuya! I want canned crab!”

Here, right on cue.

Now, Chuuya had told Dazai to tag along and help with shopping (or the Executive was ready to drag him by the ear) for three simple reasons.

First: since he didn’t turn into an octopus overnight, Chuuya couldn't exactly show up and carry home more than two (ridiculously breakable, just like his patience after a day with Dazai) compostable plastic bags full of food. He was a strong martial artist, not a damn magician.

Second: he couldn’t use Tainted, considering that his ability should have been a secret.

Third: last he checked, Dazai had been given a pair of perfectly functioning hands that he could use to help carry the food he contributed to gobbling up.

As he felt a blood vessel throb in his neck because of Dazai’s whining, Chuuya wondered how it was possible that an actual child could be more controlled and well-behaved than this *imbecile*.

“Chuuya~”

“Go chill in the freezers with the rest of the frozen fish.”

“But I want canned crab!”

“Then pay for it!”

“But Mori-san said you’d take care of the expenses! He put that in writing, too.”

The throbbing vessel in Chuuya’s neck threatened to pop. “Ha?! Why would I, when *you* are just freeloadin’ — and put down the damn cheesecake, you moron!”

Dazai did not, in fact, put down the cheesecake.
At least, Chuuya supposed, Sonoko was having a great time with her Tamagotchi and the little show Dazai was putting up for her sake.

She was sitting in the cart, swinging her legs as she laughed at Dazai's shenanigans — which made them slightly more bearable and worthy of Chuuya's attention, even after a long day at work.
He didn't complain when Dazai dropped the cheesecake with the rest of the shopping and heaved Sonoko up and out of the cart. She listened carefully as the detective told her everything about the wonders of canned crab.

Chuuya rolled his eyes. *It's not cute at all,* he told himself — and only half-believed it.

In the meantime, Dazai had also thrown into the shopping cart a pack of crab katsu sandwiches Chuuya pretended he didn't notice.

Recently, the executive had started wondering if he could trade Sonoko for Dazai. *"Ne,"* he asked Ango during a meeting, *"can't ya take Dazai instead? Child's fine, she can stay."*

After a while, sporting a mischievous grin and with Sonoko fatefully anchored to his shin, Dazai approached him again.

Not without a tinge of surprise, Chuuya realized the detective was holding two different packs of hamburgers – both farm-raised, bio, and decently expensive.

"Sonoko says she wants hamburgers," Dazai announced, handing the two packs to Chuuya to inspect. "What brand do you think we should get? One is more expensive, but I can't tell the difference."

Brow furrowing, Chuuya studied the packages. Then, he looked at Dazai. His blood vessel was pulsating again, practically crying for mercy.

"This is not crap."

Dazai lifted an eyebrow. "No, it's not."

"It's actual food," the executive insisted, which only prompted a higher eyebrow.

"I suppose it would be classified as such, yes."

"Are you sure you're Dazai? *The* Dazai Osamu?"

Dazai looked at him as if he was crazy. "Huh?"

"You're being very uncharacteristically helpful."

The smile Dazai offered him was sweet. Terribly, scarily sweet; his eyes were kindled by a tenderness that Chuuya never thought he could witness on the lips of a man whose smile always looked like a nightmare.
A smile that seemed almost misplaced on the lips of a man whose lack of humanity had birthed the legend of a demon.

Dazai's name reverberated through the underworld like a death sentence.

“Chuuya might be surprised,” Dazai said. “All you have to do is let me be helpful, you know.”

Surprisingly, his voice was kind as well. He could always sing birds out of their nests, Dazai, but it would have been to shoot them dead; now, it just sounded *peaceful.*

That was when Sonoko tugged at Dazai’s trousers.

“Dazai-nii, can I go see the books?” she asked, gingerly gesturing in the direction of the child’s aisle.

Dazai nodded, freeing her hand from the beige fabric of his slacks and grabbing her fingers instead. “Sure.”

“Dazai can take you,” Chuuya said, tilting his head toward the man. Letting him be useful and all, right? Dazai had *asked,* after all. "I can deal with the hamburgers while you both pick up a book. We can read it later.”

“Really?” Sonoko echoed, eyes glistening. Her voice sounded thin as if he had to give something in return for every scrap of freedom that was offered to her. As if she had to *pay* for it.

“Yeah, sure. Go have fun, kiddo.”

“Let’s go,” Dazai agreed, holding her hand while guiding her in the direction of the kids' area. “Chibi can take care of boring adult stuff.”

Sonoko liked the book section as much as she enjoyed puzzles and toy cars. Her eyes gleamed whenever she saw a jigsaw puzzle, and she looked at every bookshelf with the reverential awe of a person who had never seen so many books together before. Her lips curled up whenever she saw a book, and her fingers flexed and her hands immediately reached out to touch it.
Chuuya knew that Dazai was dead-set on indulging the child's love for books. On his hand, he didn’t have objections; on the contrary.
He didn’t have any memory of his days in the lab, but Sonoko did. Her non-violent ability allowed her to undergo a different kind of experimentation than the one Chuuya lived through, with less physical trauma and fewer blackouts.

She didn’t have to be sedated through the tests, which meant that she remembered most of the games and the puzzles. Even though she refused to talk about it, Chuuya had no difficulties in picturing it in his mind: a bruised lab mouse in a little human skin — a person, yes, but only just.

Trauma and physical pain had removed his memories, sheltering his mind from what it couldn’t metabolize, but Sonoko remembered all the things that had been forced on her, and the ones she never had. She had just started to understand what she had missed.
Books, and presents, and a room and a *home*.

Anger surged in Chuuya again at the thought, so devastating that he heard the plastic wrapping of the hamburger crack under his fingertips.

Research Facilities kept on existing, and he had fought for what seemed like nothing. Several versions of him died for *nothing.* He was forced to step up his game and save another child just like him - because, apparently, scientists and governments never learned.

When Sonoko and Dazai reappeared, having left Chuuya plenty of time to plan all the meals of the week, Dazai was holding Sonoko's hand. The child, in turn, hugged a book against her chest.

“Dazai o’nii-chan is buying me this,” she declared once she walked close enough to Chuuya, showing the pink book to the redhead with pink cheeks and a smile full of pride. “It talks about a bunny! And his tail is fluffy!”

Chuuya smiled back at her, crunching down to her level to let her show him. The white tail of the bunny was fluffy indeed, as were the velvety petals of the flowers that peppered the tactile book. It was probably a little too simple for a child her age, but Chuuya refused to comment on it. She’d get there with time. She was *catching up.*

He took a good look at the book and nodded in approval. “That’s very nice, kiddo.”

“Right, *right?”*

“Have you thanked Dazai-nii?”

Dazai hummed. “She did.”

“I did!”

“Great, good job. So Kouyou Ane-san won’t scold me again for teaching a kid to be impolite.”

“Does Auntie Kouyou say ‘thank you’ a lot?”

“Yes, she does," Chuuya agreed. "She’s very refined. And she told me to make sure to teach you that, when we get something from someone, we say ‘thank you’.”

Obediently, Sonoko turned to Dazai with a solemn frown on her face. Her bottom lip jutted out, but she still kept the book pressed against her chest. “Thank you, Dazai-nii.”

Dazai smiled at her. That gentle smile again, the one who caused the redhead to skip a beat, as tender as his fingers that found her head to caress her hair. And for a second - a foolish, absurd second - Chuuya thought he could glimpse at their future in that smile. “You’re very welcome, princess.”

“Shall we read it at home, then?” he asked, clearing his voice.

Initially, he meant that Dazai could read the book to her while he enjoyed a peaceful and *adult* glass of fine wine. He deserved a break.

However, the way her face cleared up and how fast her smile turned into a beam made him want to join in.

He could have his drink later.
He could bicker with Dazai about the dinners for the week and the house chores *later*.

Sonoko's enthusiasm almost made him feel bad for wanting to back out of the mission because of Dazai. It was a life Chuuya would never experience again, and it felt great, and he promised himself he would savor every inch of it while it lasted. He wouldn't let Dazai ruin it.

Kouyou was right: whatever *this* was, it was not going to last long anyway.

—

"Ah? I asked you to take the wallet!"

"Stop yelling at me, Slug. I forgot," Dazai whined with a dramatic sigh, slumping over the half-full paper bag of groceries. Chuuya wanted to shove him. In another life, Dazai was *definitely* an opera actor. "But I have cards."

"Pray your gods they accept the Pasmo."

Dazai grinned. "I'm sure the lovely lady will let us know. Do you…?"

"Ah, we do accept cards," the woman at the till confirmed, bending in a polite bow.

"Fantastic~"

Dazai smiled at her, and she smiled back. "If I may— what a lovely family you have, sir."

Chuuya's blood froze in his veins.

The cashier — a middle-aged woman with a black bob and a white tag pinned to her chest identifying her as *Sayaka* — was not addressing the comment to him, or he would have died of sheer embarrassment.

Dazai, bless his lying heart, flashed the woman a smile as he handed her a credit card. *Chuuya's* credit card, for the record.

"Why, that's right," Dazai crooned, "Isn't my family beautiful?"

Chuuya ignored the jolt of irritation, focusing instead on stuffing the bags with the grocery shopping that Dazai was dutifully ignoring.
Chuuya couldn't even complain, since Dazai was set into sweet-talking the cashier into giving them a discount.

As always, Sonoko was clinging to Dazai's hand and looking at the people queuing behind them. If she left his side and wandered about, it was never far.

This way they could see her from the till, keeping a steady but discreet eye on her.

The last thing Chuuya needed was to jeopardize a life-changing, inter-organization mission while bagging a pack of *avocados*.

As he worked, Dazai kept talking about the weather and childcare to the store worker. As if the beanpole knew *shit* about childcare other than how babies were made.

With every moment, Chuuya's annoyance muted into the passive-aggressive, bubbling need to punch a wall or three.

"Please come back again soon." The woman offered him a smile, a quick bright grin before turning to Dazai. A complicit, *you-did-well* grin.
It felt somewhat different from the usual smile people gave him, the thin stretch of lips to pretend they didn't hate their job. "Your family is lovely."

Chuuya almost choked on his spit. He could have eaten his *hat.*
On a surface level, he knew how happy they looked: it was part of the guidelines of the mission. They earned their happily ever after, found the right person at the right time, yada yada yada.

They weren't happy, they were professional.

"I'm a lucky man," Dazai said. Chuuya's jaw almost hit the ground.

What?

"We're not—"

The detective didn't let him finish. "Hopefully, families like ours will be allowed to move meaningful steps into being together, in the future."

Chuuya nodded. "Yeah, right."

On that, at least, they agreed. He just never knew Dazai felt that way.

"Of course," the woman said. Clearly, she did not believe Sonoko was *their* child — and given the current paperwork and inaccessible adoption system, the easiest thing to imagine was that the kid came from a previous relationship. "Have you been together long?"

"N—"

"Seven years," Dazai interrupted him. He laughed. "On and off."

"More off than on," Chuuya said.

"But madly in love all along."

Chuuya forced a smile on his face. The woman was chatty, and Dazai was only cementing their story. "Definitely."

“Aw, I can see that. And your child looks lovely.”

“She does, I know.” Chuuya could have *sworn* Dazai’s voice had become high-pitched. “But we were fortunate to have options abroad — and to have a supporting network. Most people are not as lucky.”

“Indeed,” the woman said. “This government should do better.”

“Speaking of which, I saw you offer a point membership system,” Dazai followed, smooth as silk as he finally targeted his end goal. “Would we need a proof of familyship? The discounts are quite interesting.”

“Ah!” The woman parted her lips as if the reference had reminded her of a big part of her job she’d since neglected. Dazai had a knack for roping people into doing exactly what he wanted.
Gentle manipulation: in the end, you’d fall right into his trap, shake his hand and thank him for the ride. “Ah, goodness me, of course. Yes. We offer a special point card to families — it’s free admission. We repay loyal customers with discounts, and every Friday there’s fruit half-price. And the lottery, of course.”

“Lovely,” Dazai said.

“It *is* a special event for families in the neighborhood, but we’ll make an exception for some of our most trusted clients.”

Dazai bowed and thanked her.

The woman also handed him a flyer filled with pictures, significant reductions and a call to action that promised ‘out of the world’ discounts.
Chuuya half-listened as he finished bagging the groceries and typed in his code in the card reader, silently musing that the deals weren’t actually half-bad. He paid for his Nanaco, and this one was free, so there was no harm in trying to get it.

“That is interesting,” Dazai hummed, brushing his chin in faux contemplation. It would have looked genuine to everyone, but not to Chuuya. “What do you say, honey?”

Oh. God.

Forcefully, Chuuya swallowed. The pet name remained stuck in his dry windpipe.

For a second – and only for the sake of their farce – he was *sure* Dazai would have leaned in and kissed his cheek.

The situation oddly reminded Chuuya of another time, of a mission in the countryside when they ended up doing something they both never mentioned again.

“They get notebooks for free after 4,000 points,” Chuuya noticed, pointing at the flyer just to ignore how the *honey* had shot him through the heart. Bam. Man down. “Why not? There’s no harm in saving money.”

“Right, *right*?”

“I mean — you’re kinda broke, so it could help for sure.”

“Chuuya! Always so mean.”

Falling into the part, Chuuya flashed a complicit grin to the cashier. “I’m the rich one. He’s the househusband.”

“More like the Sugar Baby, since this Slug here is old—”

“Oi, I’m only older by three months!”

The woman giggled, hiding her mouth in her hand. “Please, do take your time to fill in the form. Here’s your receipt—if you want to complete the module for the loyalty card, you can use the free space next to the till. I’ll be with you for the registration in a moment.”

“You’ve got this, baby?” Dazai asked, squeezing Chuuya’s hand in a subtle but obvious display of connection. A perfectly believable act of performative love.

Chuuya knew that, just like the nickname, Dazai’s question was another way of saying ‘*Use an alias, I don’t care which one.’* As if Chuuya was a rookie.

How annoying.

“Let me file this, ya can go be useful.”

“Fantastic. I’ll go check on Sonok—”

That is when they noticed it. Sonoko, in her yellow dress and innocent attitude, had approached a young woman behind them in the queue. She had pale skin and short dark hair, and a navy blue skirt Sonoko had tugged slightly to attract her attention.

“Aw, hello,” the girl was saying, adjusting a strand of raven hair behind her right ear. “What a pretty little dress you have.”

Sonoko looked up at her, hand still grasping the girl’s skirt. “You are very pretty, miss.”

The girl giggled, lowering to Sonoko’s level with a smile in her eyes. Her clothes looked expensive, as did her makeup and long, curled eyelashes. Chuuya didn't pay it much mind.

“Aw, thank you.”

“And it’s okay,” Sonoko continued.

The executive’s head perked up, his attention spiking at the change of tone. *Fuck,* he thought – it was too late, too slow.

He registered almost through a haze the way Sonoko’s fist slightly glowed red, secured around the girl’s pristine skirt.

“I am sorry,” Sonoko said to the girl. “I am sorry if you will die.”

Chuuya’s eyes widened. Fuck. *Fuck.*

He bolted in the direction of the girl, entirely aware that it was too late to salvage the situation – registering the paleness of her cheeks, the utter and sudden emptiness of her eyes.

Humans have a specific expression when they are confronted with the idea of their imminent death.
They turn pale, with ashen skin and blue lips as if they are tasting a bite of the inevitable destiny.

Chuuya knew it well. It was the face people made upon seeing *him* cracking his knuckles.

But Sonoko was too young to be looked at like a monster.

Almost on cue, he and Dazai moved at the same time.

Chuuya grabbed the child first, lifting her in his arms while taking advantage of the fact that the girl was too stunned to find an answer.

“I’m so sorry,” the redhead chimed in, falsely chipper. His voice frayed, but he powered through. “Sonoko, sweetheart, how *many* times do I have to tell you to not wander up to strangers?”

The young woman looked at him like she’d been slapped. “Ah,” she murmured. “I must have misheard. I thought the child said—“

“Yes, surely you misheard,” Dazai purred. It was a tone that would have convinced anyone of anything.

“I saw it,” Sonoko insisted. “I *saw.”*

As he adjusted Sonoko in his arms and gently pressed her face against his neck, Chuuya *prayed* she would just take the hint and shut up. God, she just had to shut up. “Enough,” he ordered, and she went dead still under his touch.
He wondered if it sounded a little too harsh, too similar to the tone he should have used with a subordinate rather than a child.

He didn’t *know.*

Instead, Dazai focused on the woman. He offered her his hand without ever breaking eye contact. “Miss, you are quite pale. May I escort you home?”

“Easy, dumbass,” Chuuya hissed, side-glancing at him. “I’m sorry the kiddo startled you, ma’am.”

“It’s okay,” the girl murmured. But nothing was okay in the way she looked at Sonoko.

“Ah, children— they are always funny like that when they get tired,” Dazai said, timbre sweetly dark and eyes half-lidded. His words tasted like venomous honey. He finally took the girl’s hand, and she didn’t pull away from his grip. Still, when the detective talked, it was to Chuuya. “Dear, I can finish up and get the groceries while you take Sonoko-chan to the car. Do you mind…?”

(Take her out of here.)

“Of course. She’s probably tired.”

(See you outside.)

“Thank you, my love.”

As he turned, Chuuya only caught the edge of Dazai’s joyless smile.
The detective had slipped on the mask of a diplomat, the polite smile of the charming prince with a talent for spinning excuses that sounded too good to be anything but true.

Chuuya remembered it well. He remembered everything.

They didn’t have to talk at all to fall into a perfect, long-rehearsed kind of synchronization.

Holding onto Sonoko with one hand, Chuuya made a beeline for the door and hurried to the car in the parking lot. He forgot the form for the fidelity card next to the till, damning himself for allowing such a situation to happen in the first place. He should have known better. The *second* he shifted his focus, something always happened.

Dang it. He liked that supermarket.

As he walked, he could sense terror in the rigid stance of Sonoko’s shoulders. It oozed from the way she fisted at his clothes in the short space that separated them from the car.

She was so perfectly still, that it reminded him of the night he found her.

“You don’t have to be scared,” Chuuya murmured as he walked, so low and honeyed that the sound almost disappeared under his footsteps. He held her closer, trying to steady his own emotions – forcing himself to be calm, so she would believe him. “It’s okay.”

She didn’t reply.

Damn it, Chuuya thought. *Head-fucking-shot. Just as expected from a lab experiment.*

Their kind started collecting casualties young, callow murder machines armed with juvenile carelessness and terrifying powers, and that was the ultimate proof that the experimentation had been successful.

Their untried power was somebody else’s demise.

Climbing into the car with his heart beating in his throat, Chuuya kept Sonoko close. She settled on the driver’s seat and kept her on his knees, holding tight, feeling little bones and a

quiet bird-like heart under his grip.

He focused on good thoughts and tried to let Pillow Diaries absorb all the positive emotions he could summon. He hid his fear behind her reach, focusing on a sense of calmness he had to *unearth* from the depth of his mind — but she was so quiet, too quiet. She sniffled. And, horrified, Chuuya realized he was scared out of his mind. There was no hiding or masking it.

She thought he was mad at her, and that was likely because of the way he'd talked to her in the supermarket.

She wasn't entirely wrong, either.

Chuuya was mad. Madly worried, too.

He was mad at her for the things she had not learned to conceal. He was mad at the doctors and researchers, too, the adults who made her and who should have taught her to disguise her ability. They were useless.

Then, Chuuya thought that he *also* did not know how to control his ability. The memory came back to him with Verlaine's voice, almost like an accusation.
Sonoko had scared a woman, he had obliterated a fucking part of the city. He'd killed people in that explosion.

Yuan and the Sheep had taught him the value of subtlety, of hiding in plain sight, and now it was his turn to hug Sonoko and whisper "I'm not mad, kiddo. It's okay" until she believed it. Until they both believed it.

"Sonoko, it's okay," he tried to say again, voice shaky in the silence of the car. His body felt out of his control in a way that had nothing to do with Corruption. "Accidents happen, I promise. You did nothing wrong. It's not your fault."

"Dazai-nii…"

"He'll be back soon," he promised. He couldn't know, but he hoped that would be the case.

"O'nii-chan," Sonoko whispered after a moment of heavy silence, holding onto the red tufts of his hair. "What is a *cancer?"*

Chuuya swallowed. "Is that what you saw when you touched her?"

"I saw a memory. There was a man with funny glasses," the child explained. "And the pretty girl looked scared, so I just wanted to tell her it's fine to be scared. That it's okay. Everyone is afraid to die."

Chuuya didn't answer, a wad of cotton swelling in his throat with every breath he couldn't let out or fully keep in.

They would buy some gloves for Sonoko, he concluded. Soft, protective gloves that matched his own.

Gloves that would keep her safe.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the wonderful support and for reading.
I really really hope you like the chapter ❤️

Emojis count, as always, so let me know if you liked this 🙊❤️

Notturno of Blood

Chapter Summary

"Such a good boy for a monster."

Or: Dazai interrogates a hostage, Chuuya takes Sonoko out for a crepe and Double Black has a heart-to-heart in the laundry room. Not necessarily in this order.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to Ceres, Kat and Malaika for the help with this disaster of a chapter ❤️ I owe you my sanity.

They patched things up with the civilian girl from the supermarket with the help of some PR jazz (courtesy of Dazai) and a generous donation.
It came out of Chuuya's pocket, of course.

Bribery for a good cause, Dazai called it, masking the worries festering in his mind behind a cheerful attitude.
What if Sonoko's ability caught the wrong eye? What if she hurt someone? What if she hurt *herself?*

The following day Chuuya called Verlaine and, instead of leading Sonoko to the school's gate as always, they took her to buy a pair of gloves.

It was a beautiful day outside, blue and windy and bright. Dazai's bones felt wet and cold, his chest like a drenched kitchen towel twisted to the point of ripping, making him feel like he was moving through a thick mist.

He needed a drink.

The idea of surviving through the day sober appeared unthinkable.

It was nine in the morning when Dazai downed a bottle of sparkly sake on his way to work. He bought a second bottle for good measure and stuffed it in his trench's pocket.

Then, he adjusted his hair while looking at himself in the window of a vacant shop that had been closed recently. The glass had been fragmented by a gunshot.

He grinned at his reflection.

—

Nakahara Chuuya didn't dream.

He had grown to believe it was a sign of mercy. He was sure that, if that weren't the case, during the night his mind would have wandered back to the black-blue amniotic liquid that had kept him alive as a child.

Nakahara Chuuya didn't dream, he never did.

In turn, he wondered if Sonoko dreamed at all. Verlaine refused to talk about it, so Chuuya's best guess was a big 'beats me'. He wondered if she had dreamt about the world waiting for her outside of that cylinder filled with liquid.

Nakahara Chuuya didn't dream, and that was all.

He came to terms with that fact, eventually, faking his way with the Sheep and pretending he had nightmares like everybody else.
Pretending he was normal.

Having a child in the house did not change any of Chuuya's troubles with resting and keeping a sleeping schedule, even if it skyrocketed the amount of chores he had to take care of.

And, when the hours crept up on him — nights like *tonight* — he found himself looking at Sonoko and wondering what she saw behind her eyelids when she closed her eyes.

She'd developed this habit of climbing up in his bed, curling in between him and Dazai.
They could never deny her anything, not even that invasion of privacy.

"We shouldn't let her," Dazai used to say. Chuuya always nodded half-heartedly.

"No, we shouldn't."

"But she looks so scared."

"I mean, we *could*—"

"Just for tonight, though."

Chuuya always nodded once more. "Tonight it is, then."

It was never just one night, though.

That night — as Chuuya read on the armchair next to Dazai's side of the bed —the room was filled with the rhythmic sounds of Sonoko's breathing. The soothing sounds were interrupted only by the occasional gust of wind that rattled the windows.

It sounded like a monster rampaging outside; a dragon's lament rising from the depths of the sea.

When he first moved into his current penthouse, Chuuya had feared that the laments of the ocean's wind would have kept him up all night. As it turned out, it was quite the opposite: a constant companion, the background noise filled the utter emptiness of his head.

The rooms sounded even more lonely as Dazai had stayed at the Agency's dorms for a case.

Although Chuuya refused to admit it, an untamed, young part of himself had been searching for the man.

Not that he *needed* a partner around, of course. He never needed Dazai. He didn't need him at fifteen and had learned to live on his own when Dazai left.
Yet, he couldn't help but notice that it had been a while since his own place felt so lonesome.

Sonoko, hidden under the gray duvet of Chuuya's king-sized bed, kicked in her sleep. Her hands clasped Dazai's pillow, face hidden in the fabric.

Chuuya crossed his legs, sinking deeper into the puffy leather armchair next to the floor-to-ceiling window. A physics book rested on his lap, but his gaze was fixed on the child.

Dazai would normally either read in bed or sit next to Chuuya and bounce around ideas, developing new strategies as they both skimmed through the book.

'With that, Chuuya could do this… and then…' Dazai would say, and Chuuya would nod and silently pretend they were still on the same side.

Sonoko growled, rolling in her sleep, and Chuuya's expression softened.

He leaned back against the chair, letting out a sigh.

No wonder Ane-San seemed exhausted all the time, taking care of the children who scurried around the brothels — children of the mafia, flowers of a stifling darkness who had learned to hold guns before they learned about school books.

Chuuya still wondered, at times, once Dazai's constant chattering left his side and his head filled up with voices, if *he* was truly the best person to usher a child away from a life of sin.

He was, after all, a person who had known nothing but shadows all his life.

Alone with his non-dreams, Chuuya wondered if Albatross would have laughed at him, or if Ice Man would have told him to let go of such foolish dreams of redemption. If Piano Man would have supported this quest — 'we're the Flags, and the missions we take become collective. We've got each other's back.'

Murase would have smiled, though. Murase would have *understood*.

And Adam would have known what to do, but the batshit doctor was not picking up her phone and Shirase had an insane 'I'm out doing cool shit, please call again' voicemail.

As if sensing Chuuya's uneasiness, Sonoko stirred in her sleep, a small whimper escaping her lips as she tossed and turned. Pillow Diaries, as it seemed, acted out of Sonoko's control and on a variable radius. She had no control over a horribly strong Ability, and *he* was ruining her sleep with his gloomy thoughts.

Chuuya's heart clenched as he stepped up, willing his heartbeat to calm down as he reached out to stroke her hair.

"It's okay," he whispered, a soothing tone that seemed to belong to another person — to another *Chuuya.* It made him wonder who he might have been in a gentler life. "It's just a nightmare, kiddo."

Sonoko exhaled.

She stirred under the touch before melting under it. Her tiny hand clutched onto Chuuya's finger, absorbing the positive thoughts.

Even when she let go of him, Chuuya didn't leave his spot until a pale purple beam began to peek out past the horizon, swallowing the stars and bathing the ocean in a lilac glow.

As he headed for the kitchen for a glass of water, Chuuya noticed a soft light in the laundry room.
He found Dazai there, bandages in plain sight and hair glued to his face, rustling softly and pushing a shirt into the washing machine.

The room carried the faint scent of lavender detergent and blood.

Silently assessing the scene, Chuuya leaned against the doorframe.

It had been a hot minute since the last time he'd seen Dazai cleaning up blood.

He remembered how the man used to wash his coat in the neon lights of sketchy coin laundries — how he never complained, how he strode into the building carrying a heavy bag of blood-soaked clothes.

He seldom lived in places that came with running water, Dazai. Certainly, the shipping container the bastard used to call home *didn't.*

The memory sparked something in Chuuya — something pitiful and soft as if Dazai's refusal to rent a decent place didn't bother him anymore. It used to piss him off. Oh, Chuuya used to *loathe* it.
How stubbornly could a man decide to live like a rat, like a wet dog? Why? Dazai was rich; obscenely so.
Did he have no respect for the people who really had no shelter, and could use a damn shipping container?

Now, though, that youthful anger retreated like a stream during a drought, unveiling a riverbed of dry pity.

Something else that *did* change, was the unexpected meticulousness in how Dazai handled the clothing. He had sensed the redhead's presence, yet he wasn't saying anything.

Chuuya took in the bandages first. Then, the wide hills of his shoulders. For some reason, he wanted to touch them; he wanted to run his fingers along the valley of his muscles, over the itchy gauze splashed with blood.

He wanted to trace the ridges of those bandages, to run his fingers along the spine — down, down, *down.* But he held himself back, the impulse fleeting yet vivid.

A soft hum resonated from Dazai as he loaded the laundry detergent pod into the machine — a hushed muttering of 'damn' and 'how much did I have to add, again?' And 'with the pods it's so much easier.'

"Pods pollute the environment, don't you know?" He called, arms crossed to his chest.

Dazai didn't turn. "Do they?"

"Are you hurt?" Chuuya asked instead, his voice cutting through the mechanical hum of the laundry machine.

"Nah, Atsushi-kun just got his arm severed. Blood everywhere."

"How's the kid?"

"Used to it, by now. It's a good thing his limbs regenerate, I suppose, he could make a living out of it," Dazai answered. "Sonoko…?"

His shoulders tensed a tad. "She's asleep."

"I thought you'd be sleeping, too. I didn't want to wake you up."

"You didn't — I just had a hunch your stinky mackerel self was back. But I closed the door to our room and she's sleeping like a log anyway, so it's fine," Chuuya remarked, his voice carrying a mix of relief and exhaustion. Sonoko was okay. Himself, though? He wasn't so sure. "You holding up okay there?"

"With the washing machine?"

Chuuya could *hear* the raised eyebrow in Dazai's voice. "I meant, with that and the fact you're covered in blood."

Dazai straightened, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "It's not mine, so I'm really more concerned about the coat. I'd hate for it to get stained, I like it. It reminds me of—" A pause and Chuuya's heart stuttered. "Never mind."

"Ah. Sorry," Chuuya said.

"It's okay."

But it wasn't okay at all, Chuuya wanted to say. Whenever *you speak with your heart, you talk of him.*

And it hurt, most days.

Sometimes, Chuuya thought it would get better.
Yet, cruelly sharp like clockwork, every mention of Oda always proved to be unbearable.

There was something in seeing Dazai suffering trickling through the cracks of his masks that felt wrong, as if he was witnessing something private; something secret.

A part of Chuuya was grateful to be Dazai's partner for the simple fact that Oda *was not,* and he was sure that losing Oda as a friend *and* partner would have killed Dazai.

Maybe it wasn't much, and being left with a partner wasn't as satisfying as being left with a friend, but it was something.

"I got breakfast for later," Dazai murmured, eyes still glued to the floor, breaking the silence. "From the posh French place that you are so obsessed with."

The subtle humor in his words didn't go unnoticed. Chuuya huffed a soft laugh. "Making up for missing tonight's bedtime read?"

"I try my best," the detective replied. He closed the washing machine and leaned against the plastic, turning to face Chuuya fully. "Couldn't sleep, huh?"

"Same as you, I suppose."

Dazai glanced at the washing machine and back to Chuuya again, a ghost of a smirk playing on his lips. "Your useless melatonin pills are letting you down, Chuu-ya~?"

"Shut up. They're great."

"They're literally *placebo."*

Chuuya flipped him off, and Dazai regarded him with a grin. "I'm not gonna take lessons from a junkie vagabond who needs three beer cans to knock himself out in the evening," he said. Dazai didn't flinch.

"At least I'm smart enough to not get scammed."

Their banter held a familiar edge.
It was a twisted form of comfort, the words laced with both jest and underlying truths.

"Good for you. But your liver's gotta be pickled by now."

"And your nerves are frayed," Dazai shot back, the retort quick as an arrow. "What can we do? We're getting too old for this job, maybe. Maybe it's time we retire."

Chuuya grimaced and considered spitting an answer along the lines of '*yeah, fuck you, I'm only twenty-something'* — but he didn't.

He didn't want to remind destiny that he was in the doorway to twenty-five, lest life would reshuffle the cards and decide that he had lived enough. Statistically, he had defied all odds already.

He was alive and most people he'd known had not been as lucky.

Dazai sighed, passing a hand through his hair. It left pale, red traces on the pads of his fingers. "You okay if I take the kid to the Agency tomorrow?"

"Yeah, I need to leave early, anyway — we've got some punks causing trouble up north. I won't be home for a few days. What about school?"

"I'll take care of it."

"Ya sure?"

"It's not a problem, Kunikida and I can pick her up and take her to the Agency. She's not scared of Kenji's cow anymore, she can play while I finish work."

"Thanks."

"Just try to come home on your own legs, Slug."

A heavy pause lingered between them. The light of the room cast a deceptive sense of quietude, and something in Chuuya screamed at him that it was time to retreat. Hairs stood at the base of his neck.

When Dazai took a step closer, eyes fixed on Chuuya's, the executive pressed himself against the doorframe but didn't run away. His breath itched as he waited and *waited.*

Another step, and another more. The distance between them dwindled. For a fleeting moment, it seemed as though the barriers that separated them were about to dissolve — leaving Chuuya free to breathe, letting him free to *fall*.

It felt like standing on a ledge and holding on to a handrail that had suddenly disappeared.

This time, when Dazai stepped closer, Chuuya did the same. Mirror steps, twin movements.

Was he brave enough to close that distance and let himself drop into the void?

Would that have been so bad? He was past redemption anyway.
He had failed the mission the second he'd accepted it.

And suddenly— *ah,* suddenly he wasn't acting for the Port Mafia, because he always longed for pain as long as it came from Dazai's charitable hands.

Feeling a familiar warmth radiating from the body standing so close to him, Chuuya tilted his chin up and parted his mouth. Dazai's hand cupped Chuuya's cheek, thumb brushing the cheekbone. It was a big hand. Hands made to bring him back from the darkest corners of his mind, to steal him away from Arahabaki's jaws.
Hands made to destroy him.

Not moving, the executive leaned into the touch and breathed in the scent of lavender and the rusty traces of blood and gunmetal. The scent of a battlefield. The scent of *Dazai.*

The detective bent. Chuuya closed his eyes and almost convinced himself to let himself fall, fall*, fall,* when—

Thud!

—a loud thud from the washing machine almost made him yelp.

Chuuya jumped away, a curse slipping past his lips. His heart raced in his chest, threatening to throb out of his ribcage.

The washing machine had knocked over the laundry basket, forgotten on the edge.

Damn, he thought, it had *almost* given him a heart attack. It was a close call. *Shit,* he thought. *Shit, you idiot.*

Dazai stepped back too, a hint of disappointment shadowing his grin. "I'll go take a shower," he announced. "I need it."

Chuuya didn't speak against it despite the late hour.

He told himself it was only because he refused to let Dazai in *his* bed while covered in blood. The man's clothes and bandages held the subtle smell of the city at night, too — like pollution and saltwind and dust. It was enough to let Chuuya know he'd spent the night somewhere around the station.

As he walked past him, Dazai hesitated. He stretched an arm out and, for a second, Chuuya was sure the detective would have touched his hair and driven it past his ear.

The executive held his breath, waiting. He didn't even know what he was waiting for, exactly, and maybe that was the problem.
He didn't know what to *wish* for, with bated breath and wide eyes and the rolling of the washing machine imprinted in his brain.

All he knew was that Dazai's hand dropped to his side, and he didn't touch Chuuya at all before disappearing into the bathroom.

—

Before the demon, there was the monster.

The second son of the Tsushima family was born an anti-gifted. That meant, in short, that the young Shuuji – *Dazai* – had held death's hand ever since he was a toddler.

His father was a politician and a respected member of the National Diet. Dazai would not have called him a good man, but he had done one good thing in his life: he died.

Tsushima Gen'emon had a sharp nose for well-done deals — he found employment for his infant son, after all, selling an anti-ability presence to make sure gifted criminals would be defenseless at the time of their death sentence.

Dazai's mother had glossy raven hair, like cascades of ink parted in the middle. She was pale as snow. She looked like a ghost in her cotton night vest, the pale fabric floating around her boney ankles. She was covered in bandages all the time, the plagues of her illness and forced bedrest bleeding through the gauze and painting it red.

Her presence terrified her children, yet Dazai was the family's designated monster.

The nullifier.

"This is N0001," his father's voice repeated in Dazai's memory. *"He will help you die."*

N0001 was a child, though.

Dazai had been taught that Abilities could be either aggressive or useful. He'd also been told Longer Human belonged to the latter category.

Now, as he looked at Chuuya using Tainted to make Sonoko fly mid-air, the detective's brain couldn't quite process the things he was seeing: there was kindness in Abilities. It was something he had been discovering with the Agency, too, and that Oda had tried to show him.

Sonoko laughed, extending her arms and flapping them as if she were a bird. She glowed red, but gravity was gentle with her. It was not crushing her bones and smashing her little body.

In turn, Pillow Diaries was both aggressive and useful, but she was using neither of those attributes — and yet, she was loved anyway. She was still free to smile.

The child trapped in a dark corner of Dazai's mind, the damaged part of his fragmented soul the detective could never heal or completely leave behind, could not understand that oxymoron. All he could hear was his father's voice, over and over again:

"This is N0000. The only anti-Gifted on the continent. He is ten, and he is useful.
Such a good boy, for a monster."

—

"We have been assigned another joint mission," was the first thing Chuuya said that morning.

He was making breakfast, whisking an egg in a pan with metal chopsticks, although his mind was already fretting over the upcoming day. Dazai sat at the table. He would have been late again, but he didn't seem frazzled about it and Chuuya had given up on asking questions about the Agency's timetable. It was none of his business.

What *was* Chuuya's business was the upcoming night.

Joint missions wore him out because they came with variables that made his job unnecessarily complicated. Dealing with the Agency's underpaid circus only worsened the situation.

What wore Chuuya out, even more, was the fact that Dazai had not even lifted his eyes from his morning coffee mug — *since when did they own a pink mug?* — and his newspaper – *when did they start getting the newspaper?* – to acknowledge his stance.

"Oi," he called. "I'm talking to you, you ass."

"Hm'm."

"We've got a mission."

"Fine," Dazai hummed, still entirely noncommittal. "And it's not office hours yet. So the tiny fairy is briefing me because…?"

"Didn't Kunikida tell you the specs?"

"Kunikida-kun tells me a lot of things."

Chuuya rolled his eyes. At this point in their coexistence, he could confidently affirm that the Agency had a new Dazai, a new job, a new unsightly coat, and the old *fucking* attitude. Splendid, good for them. He seriously needed to send Kunikida a basket of fruit. "It's gonna last throughout the night, dumbass. Where do we leave the kiddo?"

That question, at least, prompted Dazai to slowly lift his eyes.

In silence, the detective stared at Chuuya for a long moment. He lowered the newspaper, too, visibly flicking through the mental folders of his brain to hunt for the details of the particular mission they were discussing.

Leaning with one hip against the counter, Chuuya waited for him to catch up.

Port Mafia and Detective Agency didn't have many occasions to be together after the issue with the Hunting Dogs. Still, Dazai should have been aware of the details of the mission. Kunikida *must have* briefed him.
Chuuya's first choice of back-up would have been Hirotsu, but the Black Lizard was stationed for another issue and Mori had the fantastic idea of playing house with the Asshole Agency.

"The meth dealers at the docks," Dazai finally concluded.

“Bingo.”

He saw the detective take in a deep breath, brain finally kicking into strategy gear, the change visible through Dazai’s expression and posture. “Okay, I’m listening.”

“It's a three-people job with a shitload of paperwork, something that will take all night at best, so we'll have to ask someone to sleep here. I don't trust a random babysitter to show up and deal with a child who has an ability." And for the first time in many, many years, the gravity of his own words rippled through him. The risk of the lives they lived, and the possibility of not coming home. Leaving, *for real*. He gnawed at his inner cheek. "If we don't come back..."

“We are coming back,” Dazai said. It sounded final, and Chuuya clung to that certainty as he cracked a new egg on the pan. "We're definitely coming back."

The egg sizzled, melting with the butter as Chuuya mixed it with the chopsticks. He put unnecessary fervor in the movements as if he could smash the eerie thoughts away together with the food. The golden scent of butter and melted yolk filled his brain, but it brought no sense of comfort.

"You don't know that for sure,” he replied.

"I do," Dazai answered – as if the lack of uncertainty could truly, utterly manifest their success. As if they'd leave with the knowledge of a victory for the simple fact that they had someone waiting for them at home. "Ango can stay with her for the night if you have nothing against it. Or she can have a sleepover at his house."

"I don't trust that workaholic with a child. He'll teach her taxes."

“You’ve got to trust someone, Slug. Aren’t you an executive? Learn to delegate.”

“Ha?! I tried to delegate shit to you all the time and you never raised a finger to help.”

“I’m too charming to help a hat rack.”

Throwing a glance over his shoulder, Chuuya scowled at Dazai. “Figures,” he grumbled. The only true satisfaction of having Dazai working at the Agency was that he was now shoving his paperwork onto someone else — *thoughts and prayers to Kunikida and the Jinko* — while Chuuya sailed smoothly through his documents.

"Look at Chuuya," Dazai hummed. "Fussing over a kid like that. Aren't you too young to be a father?"

"Considering the mortality rate that comes with my job, I'm almost too old," he answered.

The comeback was supposed to be lighthearted. It was supposed to be fun. But, in the loaded silence that followed, Chuuya realized that it had just reminded both Dazai and himself of the reality of his situation: executives of the Port Mafia don't live long.

Executives of the Port Mafia didn’t sire children to see them grow – they did so to leave a legacy, and Chuuya was never going to have one. He didn’t even have a *surname* to pass on, something that he could call truly his own.

"Chuuya, would you want…" Dazai's voice trailed off. It died into an unsteady silence, and Chuuya had a hunch of what he was about to ask even in the quietness.

"What?"

"Have you ever thought about investing in a family?"

"Not really," he answered. "My family is the Port Mafia. I pledged allegiance to the Boss, I owe my life to Ane-san, and that's all I need."

"That's not what I was asking."

“I don’t have time for anything else.”

"Is the loyal dog saying relationships are not for him?"

His grip tightened around the chopsticks. *Fuck,* he thought. He'd gladly stab Dazai with them. "I'm not a dog, and it's none of your business."

"You don't need normality?"

Normality is a matter of perspective – that's what Chuuya thought. He didn't say it out loud, though. "What about you?" He volleyed back instead. "Ya know I don’t want a wife or anything, but you? No beautiful woman to settle down with and bully into a double suicide?"

"I think I have—“ *I think I have children, somewhere.* That's what Dazai clearly meant to say as his voice trailed off again and he cleared his throat, the truth simmering in his silence. Chuuya supposed that the idea of mini-Dazais scattered around the city was as plausible as it was unpleasant; there had been a time when his partner had been too drunk to be careful and too absent to follow up with his one-night-stands. He never cared, and those women never cared about him. "But the past doesn’t matter. What I know now is that I never thought I would look in the mirror and *decide* that a mission was going to succeed. That I had no choice but to come back."

"Yeah," Chuuya murmured. "Same here."

"We are in a truce, and a child is sleeping in the room next door."

Chuuya's heart missed a beat. "Yeah."

"Our organizations are counting on us."

"Yeah."

"We can't die," Dazai said. It sounded final. "To me, that seems like a good enough reason to stay alive."

Without a word, Chuuya accepted that answer. That's how they decided to call Atsushi to cover for the night: they discussed it over breakfast, like a civilized family. Chuuya cooking omurice while Dazai skimmed through the daily newspaper, a child sleeping in the guest room.

A fluttering sense of contentment filled him as he thought about it, making him feel heavy and light at the same time, leaving him hopeful about the odds of the night ahead.

He wouldn't live like this forever. Chuuya knew it, Dazai knew it and the executive was almost positive their superiors knew it. He *couldn't.*
He had the heart of a warrior. The battlefield called for him, adrenaline and gunpowder luring him back with a thunderous voice, echoing with thousands of screams.

However, they negotiated the *'stay with kitty at the house'* situation rather well, or so Chuuya thought – with Sonoko's eyes shining with excitement and Dazai promising her a sleepover with a giant cat. In return, she only asked for an afternoon out with Chuuya.

So, later that same day, the executive took Sonoko downtown to get a snack. He would use the chance to drop some clothes off at the dry cleaners, too. For now, he had one hand holding the child and a crepe dripping whipped cream in the other.

The same sense of contentment from the morning assaulted him again. That feeling as if he was learning something new, something important.

When accompanying Elise around the city, the executive would aim for posh cake shops and world-famous bakeries. He'd drive her to Tokyo and tour places that cost more than a normal person's yearly salary. Yet, Sonoko seemed happy enough with just the crepe place Kyouka pointed out to her.

That was not to say that Chuuya wouldn't have taken Sonoko to Elise's expensive bakeries, of course. He would have turned the stars into presents and the moon into a cake, and he would have given it all to the child — if she asked, if she *wished*. But the truth was that Chuuya liked that stand, too.

He relished the immediate reward of the simple things: the ocean, the freedom, the sky. He could taste domesticity on his tongue, watery and sweet as sugar.

Domesticity.

That alien word again.

Sonoko walked next to him, one little step after the other.

Dazai had picked out a blue dress for her *('Paid for with government money, of course,'* he said, *'thank Ango.')*, and she looked like a little drop of water in it. A creature from the ocean. She looked so innocent that, for a moment, Chuuya forgot what a troublemaker she could be.

"Chuuya-nii," she called, "when are you and Dazai-nii getting married?"

To say that Chuuya almost sputtered out a lung would have been an understatement.

He was not going to marry a traitor fish. Never. What the hell was this about, anyway?

He stared down, eyes wide and a sense of horror slithering up his limbs. That was definitely part of a long list of situations he didn't expect to deal with *ever*.

"Is Dazai telling you this nonsense?"

“H’m.”

“Was it someone at school?”

Again, she shook her head with a noncommittal hum. She clung to Chuuya’s hand as they walked past the crepe stand and walked past the busy square, the afternoon sunlight basking the stones of the pavement with a thousand shades of gold and copper. The ocean glimmered behind them as they settled on a bench overlooking the pier. Although everything about their surroundings was soothing, Chuuya’s heartbeat was still caught in his throat.

He tried to wrap his head around the question as he heaved Sonoko up on the bench one-handed, careful not to drop either the child or her (*his too,* to be honest, since she would never finish it alone) precious dessert.

Sonoko weighed almost nothing, which made the entire operation easy enough. She giggled, too.

Chuuya handed her the food once she was sitting comfortably on the bench. She beamed at him and chirped a ‘thank you for the food’.

“You’re welcome, kiddo,” he said. Yet he had a feeling *he* was the one supposed to be thanking her for smiling at him like he was more than a murderer.

He stayed close, inspecting her movements and on the lookout for stains as she ate. Something Chuuya had learned was that he needed to be ready for food disasters at all times, and nothing stayed clean for too long around children. His hat had gotten dipped in ice cream and Nutella twice already. To say that he’d *not* been happy was an understatement.

Still musing over the wedding question (ha! He could barf), Chuuya allowed some time for the girl to munch on her dessert in silence, watching as she nibbled at the corners before she attacked the center. Yuan used to do the same, too. He and Shirase would go straight for the heart of the crepe, tackling the lake of creamy chocolate first, covering their mouths and noses in the spread and powdered sugar.
Yuan, instead, took her time. She savored every bite.

At that moment, Chuuya thought that Sonoko’s personality might not have been too different from Yuan’s: she didn’t rush things, tackling the crepe one tiny bite at a time.

“So…”

“Dazai-nii doesn’t talk to me about these things,” Sonoko answered, quietly, preceding his question.

"Ok, good," he murmured. “That’s good.”

The last thing he needed was that imbecile filling up a child’s head with words that meant nothing, and with jokes that would only confuse her.

"But it’s in the way Osamu-nii looks at Chuuya-nii."

Chuuya almost choked on his spit.
Again.
Going around with a child was much more dangerous than he initially considered. "What?" he asked, trying to level his voice not to startle her.

He needed to tune down his reactions even if he wanted to *scream*.

“He looks at Chuuya-nii like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like that—“ She pointed at the sky. “Like you’re up there.”

So like I’m dead or something? “Okay,” he said frowning.

"Do you understand?" she asked.

"Not really."

"Like you are very very very very *veeeery* far away, but he loves you very very *veeeery* much."

A knot tightened in his throat. "That's very sweet."

“Dazai-nii looks at Chuuya-nii that way." She seemed to think over it for a moment, tilting her head. "Chuuya-nii doesn't, though."

Huh, he thought again. That didn’t sound promising.
For the record, he didn’t look at Dazai at all. He tried to ignore him.

“I guess,” he said. It was all he could muster, holding a tissue in his suddenly nervous hands and a *damn* child reading right through him.

"Sometimes Akiko-nee reads me the story of Cinderella," Sonoko continued. Then, she stopped and took another bite of her crepe, smearing vanilla on the tip of her nose. “From my book.”

Chuuya *wished* children wouldn't take such long roundabouts whenever they were explaining something.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple working against a dry throat, and nudged her to go on with a bob of his head.

"Yes?"

“She sneaks into the ball even though her evil mother — she’s very ugly, the stepmother, and she has a black dress and Akiko-nee says she looks like Mori-san — said no. You can’t go.”

“Okay,” Chuuya said slowly.

“Cinderella goes to the ball anyway, and her dress is really pretty. But she leaves at midnight."

"Yeah, she's gotta do that because her carriage turns into a pumpkin at midnight."

"Yes! Kunikida-san says punch— punct— punciuality is important.”

Chuuya grinned. “Punctuality. And yeah; he’s right.”

“But the prince sees Cinderella from the stairs, and he can’t follow her."

"Right," Chuuya agreed. *Shitty prince actually looked for her shoe, but it's whatever.*

"So the Prince looks at her leave," Sonoko said, voice full of seriousness and with powdered sugar sprinkled all over her cheeks. Her tone was unafraid, and Chuuya’s pulse quickened as he guessed her next words in the childish solemnity of her silences. "Chuuya-nii, I don't know if you know, but you look at Dazai o’nii-chan like that. Like he’s leaving."

Nausea gripped Chuuya’s stomach.

So he looked at Dazai like he allowed the love of his life to simply leave. *Gods*.

‘I don't know if you know,’ Sonoko even said; the little know-it-all.

And the joke in all this was that Chuuya knew she was right, he’d known it all along — he just failed to realize it would ever appear obvious to anybody but him.

Flustered, his cheeks warmed up as he looked down. He scrambled for an answer.

The shame of being called out was almost enough to make him forget that, according to Sonoko, Dazai had a habit of looking at him like he hung the moon and the stars in the sky. Allegedly, that was.

But Dazai was a master manipulator and Sonoko was a child with zero knowledge of the outside world and an ability she could not control.

Best-case scenario, she was looking at the situation through the filter of a young heart and what she had guessed from Chuuya’s mind.

Hiding the goosebumps crawling up his arms, the executive threw her a fake smile.
The encouragement in it was genuine; everything else was not. Yet he told himself she was a child and couldn’t tell the difference.

"That's cute," he said.

Sonoko pouted. "I'm right."

It wasn't a question.

Frankly, it was a little insulting how easily she could read past his excuses.
It diminished, perhaps, those feelings Chuuya thought he had concealed up to that point. Her earnest curiosity unearthed the fact that he might have been — once upon a time, maybe, in theory — in love with his partner.

He used to be driven to Dazai. He used to care.

But it was fleeting, and it was hopeless, and Chuuya got over it.

(He did get over it, right?)

"You'll understand when you're older," he said with a shrug.

"But I'm right!"

"Eat your crepe, kiddo," he said. And that was it.

—

Some people thought they could challenge god.

They opened other humans like books, with their scalpels and their scientific assumptions, reading through the lines of their vitality; erasing their beginnings and deciding ends.

The sky blazed with the dying embers of the day, hues of orange and red melting into the horizon.

In a basement, a pipe leaked and a man's hoarse screams clawed at the air as his capturer stared at him.
His pleas for mercy ricocheted off the walls as he tried to rattle himself free from the leather belts that tied him to a chair.

The man had gone missing three days before.
Hideaki Hiroshi, 63 years old. Three daughters, a wife and an array of lovers.

A former government scientist.

But he was just a trapped mouse now, with sweat-drenched brows and trembling hands, bound by heavy chains. A poor bastard.

The man had been dismissed from a government facility that dabbled with Gifted individuals and turned to a pharma house; these days, he developed caffeine-based headache pills.

Was it funny that his work helped destroy the world? Dazai couldn't tell. All he knew was that he was not laughing.

"You know, I take no pleasure in taunting small fries like you," he began. "So let's make this quick, shall we?"
He stood in front of the man, entirely clad in dark clothes — a smoke-gray shirt and black trousers completing the ensemble.

He rolled his sleeves up, bandages plainly in sight; the man wheezed.

"The anti-gifted."

Dazai's lips curled into a smirk.
He was aware that his reputation often preceded him, particularly within the clandestine circles of the influential and the powerful.
After all, he was the only nullifier around.

"Why," he drawled, "I'm honored that you know me."

"You're with the Armed Detective Agency. I've *heard* of your lot."

"Fabulous. That should make things easier."

"Let me go," the man said. It sounded pitifully like an order. "If you do, I will forget this ever happened. I won't go to the police, I won't—"

Ah, Dazai thought. That was funny.

"You're welcome to talk to the police if you please. I'm sure they would be delighted to hear from you," he purred every word in a chillingly calm tone, moving a step toward the man. "As a detective, I have a certain appreciation for the truth. It's the key to my heart, and it's certainly the key to freedom." His voice took on a taunting edge. He loomed closer. "And I *do* hope you will provide me with the truth I seek."

The man swallowed hard, stammering out fragmented sentences. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

The air in the basement grew heavy as Dazai's relaxed posture contrasted sharply with the fear that permeated the basement. His dark clothes clashed against the man's sickly paleness.

His eyes, though seemingly disinterested, remained locked onto the trembling man.

The man squirmed. "I swear, I don't know anything!"

It was a lie and Dazai knew it and the man knew it too, yet he clung to it as his last defense.
How *desperate* he sounded. How annoying, too.
He never liked prisoners who begged too early.

Dazai trotted forward, a happy skip in the steps that resounded in the dungeon. "You don't?"

“I swear!”

“Ah, that’s unfortunate. You see, I have a talent for identifying when people aren't telling the truth.”

“I—“

“And I also have a talent for making people *talk.* That was for your information.”

The scientist’s voice quivered. “Please, I have a family. Don't do this."

Dazai leaned in closer and hunched down, their faces inches apart. He could smell the fear, and the sweat, and the *prayers.* Desperate people reeked as if they were decomposing alive. Even their excrement fought to leave their bodies.

“That’s a good point. Our families are important, aren't they?" he mused, his voice a soft, eerie whisper. "I have a child at home, too.”

The man’s eyes gleamed. “See?!”

“—A child from an Osaka lab. I’m sure you remember.”

There.
In that moment, Dazai saw the color draining from the man’s face as he realized the truth.

“The child singularity—“ The man’s eyes looked for Dazai’s for the first time. “I thought all of them had failed the test.”

“You knew at least a batch had survived the merger with the anti-ability. You signed the documents.”

“I don’t remember,” he said. Another lie.

“Do you know how one *forces* a singularity?”

The doctor quivered. “Theoretically, one must create a reaction between an ability and an anti-ability. It’s dangerous. And if the body of the subject is not strong enough—“

“—clones must be created, and the DNA is tweaked,” Dazai concluded, nodding as he touched his chin. “Ability-making theory and science ended up developing clandestine Gifted Factories.”

“It was for everyone’s sake. After the Great War, we needed to be stronger; better prepared.”

“I see, I see. Was the pay that generous?”

“We didn’t do it for the money. We did it for the country’s future”

Sure, and I’m Snow White. His eyes narrowed, ruby fragments gleaming with dark light. “How commendable.”

“I served our country,” the man said. “What are *you* doing?”

Dazai hummed, faking interest.

They *sold their consciences for money and called it patriotism,* he thought. *That’s just the law of this rotten world of ours.*

“This is a nasty sight. Pretending to be innocent after playing god with human beings in Ability Farms.”

The scientist looked at him as if he didn’t believe ability users were human beings in the first place.
They were, simply put, weapons. Drifters. Nothing but rabid dogs, famished and worked to the bone, programmed to be thrown into a pit so they could dismember each other, winning wars they had no true part in.
Still, he was smart enough to not voice that opinion out loud — perhaps aware that an ability user might have reacted unkindly to such a judgment.

“I never did any of that.” He bared his teeth. “I’ll sue you.”

Dazai smiled.

“Please, be my guest.”

“You’ll rot in prison, son of a bitch.”

Been there, done that.

“Ah. I wouldn’t do that—“

”Then untie me. Now.”

”—or the Port Mafia will visit you next. You see, I’m just being considerate.”

That seemed enough to turn off the spark of fight in the scientist. His shoulders shook before his shoulders turned rigid.
eyes widened, scleras so damn white as his pupils shrank.

“I know nothing,” he said, squirming like a worm caught against the hook. The leather of the belts keeping him in place cried with his movements. “I swear. You’ve got the wrong man, I was just a run-of-the-mill data analyst. Get my superiors. Get someone else. I never made a single decision in that job, I just followed orders.”

Sure.

Nothing.

That was why Mr. Asshole here bent backward for the Yakuza. What a good whore of the system.

“What can you tell me about the Kuraokami project?” Dazai asked.

“Ah? It was a failed operation.”

“Why did it fail?”

The man hesitated. “Because of the test subjects,” he admitted, after a moment. A wrinkle appeared on his forehead. “They kept dying. They never passed all the tests, always turning out unsuitable for the experimentation.”

“So the clones died.”

“No matter how many routes we tried, they always failed.”

“What about the main subject?”

“She was a child from an island village in the south. Orphan, no siblings. The government bought her off cheap.”

“And I suppose you cloned her, injected another ability, and created a singularity?”

The man’s lips turned blueish. “That could be. I can’t remember the details, there were a lot of children.”

So, as Dazai imagined, Sonoko had no family.
If she had one, at some point, they needed money more than they needed her. She had no one to run back to, no one to call home; she’d been extracted from the lab and tossed into a crowded, loud world that effectively had no place for her. “What was the child’s original ability?”

“Mind-reading,” the man said. “I don’t know if they added more to it or how it was manipulated. It wasn’t my department.” Bile crawled up Dazai’s throat.
‘Added more,’ he said, as if she was a creative experiment, a project where ambitious men had the power to layer different abilities and pile them up like a Jenga tower.

Dazai’s arms tensed as he forced himself not to punch him. “Walk me through the process,” he said instead.

“We gave the Main Subject adrenaline shots to stay alive and sustain the self-contradicting ability that would, then, allow Main Subject to develop Pillow Diaries.”

“So there must be a code controlling the artificial ability*,”* Dazai echoed, brushing his chin.

“That specific protocol already worked in another facility. We had guidelines.”

In Research Facility B, Dazai guessed. He bit his lower lip and pushed the thought away. He could not imagine Chuuya being kept in amniotic fluid and fed adrenaline shots to survive, he didn’t *want* to. Anger bubbled in him.

He saw what Doctor N did, and yet he still refused to believe what happened to his partner. But— ah. There was no point in holding back, was there?
He was angry, now.

“Say it,” he drawled, leaning closer and planting both hands on the chair’s armrests. “What previous project?”

“I can’t, it’s classified, I—“

“Say. It.”

“…Arahabaki.”

Dazai’s fist hit the man’s stomach with the strong precision of a bullet.
This is for my partner, he thought. *This is for Chuuya.*

Cold satisfaction surged in him as he heard the bones crack, the flesh and tender entrails squishing under his knuckles. Blood spilled from the man’s lips as he coughed and folded on himself; the leather belts creaked, biting into the man’s skin.

One punch was all the personal vendetta he would allow himself. Just one punch.

Straightening up, Dazai cleared his voice and walked away, heading to a table that he was rather sure the man had not noticed before.
The detective had made sure the attention would never land on that little table, after all, because he liked to surprise his guests.

The unforgiving lights of the dungeon had kept the object semi-concealed, but Dazai heard the man’s breath hiccup as he lifted a small scalpel.
Dazai’s lips twitched up as he glanced at the rest of the blades — the same ones he’d used so many times before.

The Black Lizard’s collection of torture toys was unparalleled.

“As you know, I belong to an organization that does good,” Dazai said, lifting a scalpel to show it to the man. “But — and that is a rather important difference — we do make an exception to punish bad people. I’m afraid you've just earned yourself a place on that list."

“Please,” he murmured. “It hurts.”

Dazai arched an eyebrow. “Does it, now?”

“Yes. I beg you, *please.”*

“Since you told me something valuable, let me reveal something in return for you.” He looked at the blade, lifting it as he spoke. It would do, he decided. It’d hurt enough. “My mentor was Mori Ougai.”

The man’s eyes widened as he stilled. He was still wheezing, yet he didn’t seem to react as he registered the name.

Terror painted his skin grey. He would die, and he would do so in pain — because, while Dazai believed in being a better person and following the path of justice, he also believed in karma and in the existence of bad people. Mori was one of them. The man in front of him was another.

And the President might not have agreed with his methods, but he understood Dazai's reasons.

~~'We had guidelines.'~~

'Kill the man if he deserves it,' Fukuzawa said to him at the Agency.

~~'Arahabaki.'~~

And, oh, Dazai was going to enjoy it.

Kiss me Good-Bye

Chapter Summary

Dazai and Chuuya have a heart-to-heart during a summer festival, Dazai remembers the day he fell in love, someone gets jealous and Shin Soukoku babysit Sonoko - not exactly in this order.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Here, among other historical buildings, tourists are welcome to visit the Tsushima estate.

The villa, pride of the region and home to majestic traditional gardens, has belonged to the family for generations. After the passing of the late Tsushima Gen'emon due to illness, the historical landmark is now managed by the man's only heir.
The treasures hidden in the house of the Aomori-born statesman, better known for becoming the emperor's counselor and head of the National Diet after the Great War—"

Click

Before Dazai knew it — before he could *realize* the implications of his gesture — his hand found the controller and turned off the TV.

Click. Black screen. Peace, at last.

It was muscle memory, his fingers moving instinctively to shut up anyone who would remind him of his family's existence.

Because, in truth, Dazai's father was never a great man.

He taught Dazai the precious art of manipulating others like hina dolls, he showed him his first corpse and helped him through his first executions as Dazai held a dying man's hand. Tsushima Gen'emon was an obedient, valuable cog in a rotting system, yes, but *great?* Give him a break. Greatness was something different, something his father never grasped.

"*Dazai-san!"*

"DAZAI!" Kunikida roared, slamming a hand on his table. "What the fuck is your problem?!"

"We were watching it, damn it," Yosano moaned. She plummeted onto the tidy surface of Tanizaki's desk, letting out a deep sigh.

Dutifully, Dazai ignored the protests and lowered the controller.

He was born thrice, Dazai Osamu: once in a mansion in Tsugarou, once within the Port Mafia, and once with the Agency. The last life wasn't the one that necessarily suited him better, but it was the one he liked the most.

And the pitiful truth was that he'd turned off the TV because he couldn't *face* those images; he couldn't see that house.

~~*No matter how much time had passed, the old monsters still haunted him.*~~

His childhood memories always came back in waves and spotty blackouts: he was a toddler first, and then he was eight and then he was ten, but he was never a *child.*

He remembered his mother glaring at him from the veranda; her eyebrows were knitted in the same distrustful scowl she would address to a stranger. To someone dangerous.
He was her child, and she resented him for being born.

Then, Dazai remembered helping to throw beans around the tatami floors of the house during *Setsubun,* his older brother Bunji laughing and following their tutor as the man's boisterous voice chanted: "Go away, bad luck! Come, come, good luck!"

But good luck just didn't favor any of them. Once again, Dazai's mother blamed him for it.

And he remembered the rainy days, the gardens, the soggy noodles in fine porcelain bowls. He remembered a ball abandoned in a courtyard, a half-read copy of Tales of Spring Rain, and the signs of whippings on his shins. The basket for the ice where he would soak his reddened hands, skin so tender and raw it almost peeled off his bones.
He started hiding the unsightly stretch of his scars behind layers of gauze during that time.
He was nine.

His fingers still shivered at the memory, cold-bitten, closing around the paintbrush as he mastered the arts of calligraphy and koto playing and pretending nothing hurt.

Then, his ability manifested.

Tsushima Shuuji, Ability Nullifier N0001.

After his anti-Gift manifested, his father began selling him to the government to nullify the abilities of criminals before the execution or during interrogations.

"Oi, Dazai! At least listen when someone's talking to you!"

Flinching back into reality, Dazai plastered a smile on his face and threw a paper ball at Kunikida. As expected, it hit the man in the forehead. "Ah, but it was so gloomy!"

"That was *culturally* relevant."

"It was annoying," Dazai chirped. The words scraped his throat like sandpaper. "Let's watch a fun movie with plenty of beautiful women~"

“Go back to work if you have time for movies, you imbecile.”

Dazai laughed. “Yes sir!” He said, scrambling a military salute.

The way Atsushi tittered at the shenanigans from the table next to him soothed his tensed muscles, although only just. Hearing his mentee laugh made Dazai chuckle too, and his own voice rang loud and brazen; it was genuine as far as the Agency was concerned.

He needed to get it together. Reminiscing about old nightmares would only turn his mood sour, and there was no point in wallowing in what couldn’t hurt him anymore.
He would finish his work, go to Lupin, and pass out before sundown. *That* was how the day was supposed to go.

Still, ten minutes later, Dazai had moved to fold a search warrant into a paper airplane as the memories simmered in his stomach.

‘Tsushima Gen’emon died of illness.’

“That program wasn’t accurate anyway,” he hummed to himself.

His father did not die because of an illness: he was found dead in the garden, bullets in his hands and skull.

Dazai remembered it well.

After all, he was the one who killed Tsushima Gen’emon.

—

Rainmaker. *Kuraokami*.

And then Arahabaki, the god of crossroads; the deity of nowhere and everywhere and nevermore.

Chuuya never considered their Project-assigned names as a part of his personality. He wasn’t like Verlaine. However, he had to admit that, with a white wolf mask in her hand, and wearing a pale yellow yukata and silk gloves separating Pillow Diaries from the rest of humanity, Sonoko looked somewhat similar to a spirit.

With summer fast approaching, the child had begged to visit a local festival. She longed to see the world, and Chuuya had already established it would be safer for her not to join the rest of her class when they visited public places outside the school, considering the lack of Ability Users among the teachers. Dazai protested, finding it unfair.
Chuuya replied they could do nothing about it, and that cleaning up after a mess would have been *more* unfair — yet, in secret, he loathed himself for such a trenchant imposition.

Did Sonoko understand that he was robbing her of precious experiences? Did she resent him, or would she do so in the future?

In her place, he would have hated himself, too: half guardian, half jailer.

Maybe it was because of that simmering sense of guilt that Chuuya had finally caved in.

That was how the executive and Akutagawa ended up taking Sonoko to see the fireworks show — he supposed that an ounce of normality would help the child while minding the security of Yokohama's population.

The riverside promenade was alive with energy and packed with bustling visitors: a sea of dangling paper lanterns casting a warm glow over the stalls and the streets swarming with people.
Sonoko's eyes sparkled with excitement, her gloved hands tugging on the Burgundy of Chuuya's sleeve. She was staring at a group of children nibbling on candied apples.

"Chuuya-nii—" she pointed at the apples "— *please?"*

Chuuya grinned down at her.

Dazai had put a limit to the sweets she was allowed to eat in the house, but he supposed that what the Mackerel didn't know wouldn't hurt him. After forbidding her to join the outings with the rest of her class in school, the executive had decided to never tell her 'no' again unless it was absolutely necessary. "You want one?" He asked, just to make sure.

"Hm-m."

"Sure. Let's find a candy stall."

"Ryuu-nii too?"

"Ryuunosuke too, yeah. He's gotta eat, or he'll shrink and his coat won't fit him anymore."

"I'm fine, Chuuya-san," Akutagawa protested.

"That's a troublesome answer, ya know. I heard Jinko eats to his heart's content every day without much of a fuss."

It was no surprise that Akutagawa needed to be tricked into accepting kindness from anyone but his sister; that didn't mean Chuuya was going to give up. He was a superior, after all, and ought to take good care of his subordinates. So he granted him a moment of hesitation — then, the young man grimaced and Chuuya could *see* any argumentativeness abandon his body, melting the stiffness of his shoulders and neck. "I suppose I could eat something, yes."

He had to give it to Akutagawa: he was handling the unusual mission better than he would have expected.

They reached a stall displaying an array of candies of all colors — blue and red jellies, candied fruit, pastel-hued mochi overspilling with runny ice cream. Sonoko's gloved hands pointed at the candies she wanted. She had learned how to be sweet yet convincing, a polite assertiveness the executive blamed entirely on Dazai.

Chuuya purchased a bag of assorted sweets for Sonoko, who clutched her treasure with a gleeful 'thank you.' With a grin, he *also* tossed a little bag of candied figs to Akutagawa,

Rashomon's tentacle glitching in the air for a split second to catch the bag before it hit the boy in the face.

"You like figs, right?" He hummed. "Shitty Dazai mentioned it once or twice."

"Thank you, sir," Akutagawa mumbled, dropping in a bow. The paleness of his cheeks bloomed with a dusty pink — if because of the candies or because Chuuya remembered his favorite food, the executive couldn't tell. "You didn't have to buy me anything, sir. I can't accept it."

"Bet ya can."

"But, truly, I couldn't possibly—"

"It's an order. Dispose of those candies as you please."

"Thank you," Akutagawa said again– *louder,* this time, defeat clear in his tone as his fingers already worked to open the bag.

He shrugged. "Don't mention it."

Now, Chuuya should have known that festivals meant people – which by extension meant emotions, and Sonoko seemed a little high on it. She smiled a lot at strangers, talking to all the people she met and pointing at Chuuya, declaring: "This is my o'nii-san, and he is *veeeery* strong."

Chuuya had lost count of the times he and Akutagawa had to drag her away before the child revealed something dangerous.

The candies had covered her mouth and cheeks in colorful sugar, and she wiped it clean with her sleeve before Chuuya could even *utter* 'tissue.'
It's fine, he thought, vaguely defeated. *You win some and lose some.*

After some time wandering, Sonoko halted again. This time, Chuuya could swear that her eyes twinkled — which was *never* a good sign.

She pointed at a kissing booth clad in pink paint and bright yellow balloons, where two girls and a boy laughed from behind a colorful sign with hearts and kiss stamps.

"Ah!" Sonoko chirped. "A 'issing booth!"

"…A what?"

"A kissing booth!"

Chuuya scowled. "You know what *that* is?"

"Naomi-chan says that it's for boys and girls who are in love-*love* with each other, and want to kiss-kiss," Sonoko replied, her cheeks stuffed with a piece of candy. Which was something

innocent enough, Chuuya supposed, as he forcefully moved past the booth and side-eyed Akutagawa to beg for help. The younger boy took his time munching on a candied fig.

“Apparently, this kind of stuff is rather popular with the girls,” he explained, voice colorless. “Gin and Higuchi keep talking about it, too.”

“Ha? Isn’t it stupid? Why would anybody kiss a stranger?”

“I suppose the *appearance* of said stranger may play a part in that decision.”

“Like… if it’s an idol or something?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

Chuya *tsk*ed. “That’s still dumb.”

Who wanted to exchange saliva with a random person, no matter how good-looking they might have been? How *unhygienic* was that going to be, and what would anybody gain from it? It made no sense. It actually sounded *gross.*
He was still mulling over it when Sonoko tugged again at the sleeve of his yukata, somewhat sheepish.

“Chuuya-nii, are you okay?”

“Huh, sure. I’m just thinking of something.”

“…Are you in love?"

Chuuya's steps faltered as he risked tripping over his own feet, taken aback. What kind of *mental fucking gymnastics* was that?

He mentally thanked the Gods for Sonoko’s gloves. They learned something new about Pillow Diaries every day, mostly through trial and error: as it turned out that, unlike Chuuya and Verlaine’s abilities, the new artificial Gifted had *layers.* The ability in Chuuya’s body was a switch — he could alter the gravity of what he touched, or let loose and manipulate gravitons at the price of his conscience. On, off. Touch, nothing, utter destruction.

Sonoko’s ability was, in turn, a *spectrum.* The singularity that created her ability was, according to Mori, better balanced than Chuuya’s own: it was made of softer curves, not the steep spike of Corruption. Science had progressed.

While she might have been able to sense the emotions in the air, she couldn’t *read* them — or any connected memory, for that matter — without the catalyst of direct contact.
So, yes: he was *glad* for the gloves.

In all frankness, though, he hadn't expected to have such a conversation with Sonoko, especially not after what she said about Dazai and Cinderella — and not with Akutagawa witnessing the whole thing. He thought he had shut down the love topic, but *clearly* he was wrong.

His pulse raced as his head had the terrible idea of birthing an image of Dazai. He instantly wished he could scoop his brain out of his body with his bare hands.
He wasn't in love with Dazai. Of course, he wasn't. Thinking of the bastard whenever he was cornered into an annoying situation was simply instinctual, at this point.

"Why?" He asked instead, fighting to keep his tone steady.

"Naomi-chan says people who are in love-love kiss. And she says love is veeeery important."

"Well, I suppose that is true," Chuuya tried. Kunikida and the other asshole detectives better stop talking nonsense to a kid. "Although it's okay to take your time with it."

"And Naomi-nee says love is like a warm candle."

Chuuya twisted his mouth, looking at Akutagawa. *Ah, setting himself on fire was tempting indeed*. "Dunno about that. But she should also have told you that you're too young for this kind of thing. Same goes for kissing boys or girls, okay? You've gotta wait."

"Oh," Sonoko said. Bless her, she sounded genuinely distraught.

"You'll understand when you're older, yeah?"

"But I'm older now!"

"Not enough."

She thought over it. "…Will I be old enough tomorrow?"

"Let's say in a couple of years." *Or better, a decade or two.* He grinned. "No need to rush this kind of trouble."

"But Naomi-chan talks about love all the time."

"They truly have no work going on," Akutagawa growled under his breath.

Although he agreed, Chuuya flashed the younger boy a smirk. "I wonder if the Jinko joins in on these discussions— What do *you* say, Ryuu?"

It was worth it, if only for the sake of Akutagawa's furious blush and the slight twitch of his brow.

"*Chuuya-san."*

His grin only widened. Ah, it was *too* easy. "What?"

"Please, just… don't."

"And Naomi-chan says that love makes her happy," Sonoko chimed in.

"Happy, huh?" Chuuya replied, attempting to keep his tone light when the word weighed on his stomach.

“Yes!” Undeterred, she tugged at Chuuya's sleeve, her green eyes filled with determination. And he thought that she even *looked* like Naomi and the detectives, for a second: that absurd fixation with things that didn’t last. Love never did. Love always ended as the sun came up, and lovers always left at the end of the night. “But! But Chuuya-nii should think about it!”

“About what?”

“Love!” She repeated it as if he was being dense. “What if you miss it!”

“…What? Why?”

“Well, Chuuya-nii is old.”

“Ha?!”

“She has a point,” Akutagawa hummed, covering his words with a cough. Chuuya elbowed him.

“You shut up, you’re gonna end up alone like me and we’ll grow old playing Go and working overtime, just like Hirotsu-san,” he growled, scowling at Sonoko’s perseverance. She was getting that after Dazai, no doubt. “Now, little miss. You've got quite the attitude tonight, don’t ya?”

“Because Naomi-chan says it’s important.”

“Do you even know what *important* means, kiddo?”

Slowly, Sonoko scrunched her nose. “No,” she admitted after a second of hesitation. Chuuya snorted, amused.

From the start, Ango suggested Sonoko would be more emotionally intelligent than most people due to her ability, but the last thing everyone needed was an Agency part-timer to fill her with fairytales.

And now Chuuya had no idea how to explain to a child he would rather enter a fighting arena with broken bones rather than worry about a non-existent love life — because people like them had a fucked-up priority list with fucked-up hearts caught in bubble wrap.
Those hearts that barely breathed and never saw the sun, but at least they never got hurt. Hearts that died young, most of the time.

God damn it, he thought.

“Look, this is—“ He swallowed, measuring every word. “I know you’re curious, kiddo, okay? And that’s okay. Your Ability is about *people,* and it’s fine to be impatient. But you need to give yourself time to understand what all these emotions mean. Some of them are for grown-ups, and you should be careful around them.”

“But I’m old enough now,” she fought back, and Chuuya’s lips instinctively curled up. It was something he used to say to Ane-San about his own ability.

I'm old enough, he used to say. *Let me fight more, let me train more — I'll become an executive faster than anybody else. Faster than shitty Dazai, for sure.*

"I told you, you're not."

"Tomorrow I'll be old enough," she argued again.

"Nah, you're not going to be old enough tomorrow — sorry 'bout that, kid. When it is time, you will feel it right here," He pointed at her belly, just at the center of the orange *obi*, and she giggled. "Do you remember when we went on the carousel, you and I? It'll be that same void, but with your feet still on the ground."

Her eyes widened. "Like when Chuuya-nii makes me fly?"

"That's right," he said, gently. Not that he needed to broadcast to *Akutagawa* that he used Tainted to make a child laugh, but, hey, that was his life now: doing homework, explaining love without ever truly experiencing it, and wearing clown makeup. "Until then, be patient."

"Like Chuuya-nii is patient with Dazai-nii?"

"Patient may be the wrong word here," Akutagawa hummed, earning a glare from Chuuya.

"I guess it's complicated," he murmured.

Sonoko cocked her head to the side, the fringe slipping in front of her eyes as she gazed up at Chuuya. "But Chuuya-nii is always with Dazai-nii. You're going to get married."

"We're not," he assured, more for Akutagawa's sake than anything else.

"You call Dazai-nii cute names!"

"Huh? Such as?"

"Shitty Dazai." She smiled, without missing a beat.

"That's not—" *Oh, god,* he thought. That might have been his fault. "That is not a cute name. That's a bad word. *Please*, tell me you didn't go around calling your friends at school *shitty."*

For the first time, munching on her sleeve, Sonoko appeared confused. She looked at him, and at Akutagawa, big eyes resting on both of them for several moments before she whispered: "…Is it bad?"

Ah. Fuck.

"Yeah. Please don't do it again."

"But Chuuya-nii says Dazai-nii *messes up your tummy."*

Ah, he did say that. "That's because he can't cook, Sonoko. That was a different context, and I meant what I said – he hurts my stomach. In a bad way."

“And Dazai-nii smiles a lot when he is with us.”

Chuuya swallowed. “Right.”

“And you're in love with him?”

“No,” he said. “I’m not.”

It tasted like a lie, like he might have earned a place in hell just for *considering* that possibility, but he was positive that Dazai would never become *that* kind of partner. Ever. He and Dazai had a unique bond.
They trusted each other, and that was that. That was all.

Sonoko blinked, perplexed, turning to Akutagawa. “…Are you in love with Ryuu-nii, then?”

“Whoa— what? Where did this come from?”

Suddenly caught in the argument, Akutagawa looked like he might have choked on a fig. “Huh.”

“You are always laughing around Ryuu-nii.”

Slowly, Chuuya nodded. That was because he was mending the boy’s wounds, and repairing the mess of shattered self-esteem Dazai left behind. Instead of replying, he ruffled Sonoko’s hair. "Don’t sweat it, kiddo. I’m in love with my work, and that’s enough for me."

He could tell from Akutagawa’s face how sad that sounded, but he didn’t care. It was the truth, and it ended the conversation. Sonoko shut down about love, mumbling something about talking about it to Naomi and quickly losing interest in the subject as Chuuya encouraged her to go check out another stall full of books.

Akutagawa, who had been observing the conversation quietly, approached his side. He stifled a cough with a hand in front of his mouth. "It was an excellent speech, Chuuya-san."

Humming to himself, Chuuya wet his lips.

“That’s all it was,” he said, swallowing dry. “A pretty speech.”

He looked at Sonoko, who had run in the direction of the books and had started talking to a couple with a big, friendly chocolate Labrador, with her candies in one hand and her white wolf's mask in the other. When she reached out for the dog’s soft fur, it was with gloved hands.

She beamed and giggled, and Chuuya could not *understand* why on earth Tanizaki Naomi would want to complicate a life that was so utterly pure.
Romance was just a marketing move for people without a purpose.

Love could take many forms — a family, a brother, a sister — other than romance. A partner, perhaps.

How did you know you fell in love with the Jinko? Lingered on his tongue as he scrutinized Akutagawa's face. *Was it something he said? Was it a moment, was it fast? Did it hurt?*

But it meant nothing because Chuuya knew nothing of romantic love.

All he knew was that, one day, he had entered his favorite bar and had to reassure his dying best friend that he had managed to save Doc.
He knew that, one day, his so-called father tried to kill him. He knew he had hugged his second-in-command on the docks as he embarked on a ship to London, and in that moment of parting, they had forgiven each other.

And he knew that, one day, his partner left him and took a part of Chuuya's soul with him. Dazai clawed at a part of his heart and tore it away without a word, eating it as he walked out of his life.

On the way out, the bastard didn't even bother to close the door.

As if somewhat knowing that Chuuya was thinking about him, Dazai decided to pick that exact moment to text him a snail emoji. Chuuya didn't reply.
He sneered, stuck his phone in the sash of his yukata, and ignored the uneasy feeling sprouting up his arms.

His stomach did a funny little thing, but he told himself it was just annoyance.

—

The deeper they ventured into it, the more the festival turned into a riot of colors and sounds, a vibrant celebration that had drawn people from all walks of life. Rows of lanterns illuminated the streets.

Stalls lined the thoroughfare, offering street foods, games, and festival souvenirs.

Takoyaki sizzled on the grill and street vendors turned yakitori skewers over open flames, the sweet scent of cotton candy filling the air. Laughter and cheerful chatter echoed through the warm night, and Chuuya felt normal for the first time in a while.

Sonoko was grasping at Akutagawa's sleeve like a duckling following her mother, soaking in the festive atmosphere.

Her gaze darted in all directions, eyes wide with wonder as she took in the masks, the yukatas, and the mesmerizing street performances.
She pointed at a goldfish stall, then at a group of dancers, then at a shrimp stall. She sniffled when a child fell, bruising his knees, and she felt his pain as if it were her own. Chuuya was almost about to call it a night when he spotted a mop of brown hair in the crowd. Then, a shit-eating grin.

His jaw slacked at the sight.

Sonoko's eyes widened when she spotted the two in the crowd. Dazai wore a light blue yukata, pale like a summer morning, while Atsushi sported a more traditional, understated

tone of grey and black. They seemed tired, but the child didn't mind. She tugged on Akutagawa's sleeve so firmly that the fabric almost slipped off the man's shoulder, excitement bubbling in her voice.

"Ah! It's Dazai-nii!" She cried. Then, she promptly let go and sprinted across the street to tackle Dazai's legs. Much to Chuuya's surprise, it looked like Rashomon wanted to rush after her.

"Dazai-nii!"

Dutifully, the man squatted down to meet her. The grin plastered on his face turned gentle.

"I heard there was a princess at this festival," he greeted, with that hushed tone that always made her giggle.

'*You have to say everything like you're letting her in on a secret,'* he once explained. Now, Chuuya didn't need Parenting 101 lessons from the demon prodigy, of all people, but he had to admit that the advice was useful.

He let out an exasperated sigh as he registered Dazai's grin — his hair tucked behind his ear and lips glossy with something sweet. Candies, perhaps. Dazai always loved candies. He *really* never fucking grew up.

"Well, fancy meeting a piece of trash here." He flashed a brief smirk at Dazai before his eyes flicked to Atsushi. "And Atsushi, too. It's been a while."

Instantly, Atsushi dropped his head into a bow. "Chuuya-san. Good evening."

He bowed back, forcing himself to ignore the tension radiating from Akutagawa. He decided he wasn't going to bother with a pair of morons who were too emotionally constipated to talk out their feelings. "You two enjoying the night out?"

Atsushi's smile twitched up as he bowed his head. "We just finished a job nearby and decided to check out the area! Right, Dazai-san?"

"I just wanted to check on Sonoko," Dazai replied, his tone so flat that Chuuya almost believed him.

Akutagawa glared. "Shouldn't you be training, Jinko?"

"Shouldn't you be practicing for the next gothic vampires reunion?"

Chuuya masked his laughter into a cough.

"I am going to kill you—"

"*If* you can catch me, knock off Dracula."

"Ah," Dazai chirped, grabbing Atsushi by the scruff like a rebellious cat. "There are children present, you two. Please, try to behave."

Amused by the ruckus she didn't understand — and sensing the underlying lack of true animosity, Chuuya supposed — Sonoko giggled by Dazai's side.

The man reached out to ruffle her hair affectionately, slender fingers sinking into dark strands of perfectly straight hair, turning his attention to the young girl. "Speaking of surprises— would you like to try your hand at catching a goldfish? Chuuya can buy a biiiiig bowl!"

"Ha? Buy it yourself!"

But it was too late to control the amazed smile that spread across Sonoko's face. "Really?"

"Of course! You see, Atsushi here is a cat, and cats are great at fishing."

"If we really want to catch anything, we should use Rashomon," Akutagawa offered, too, although Chuuya had a feeling it was to one-up Atsushi.

So much for keeping their abilities secret.

Sonoko swung her arms open, shaking them like a little bird. "Ahhh! Let's try, let's try!"

Chuuya sighed and shook his head, unable to suppress a tinge of fondness for the chaos caused by their unconventional group; two generations of Double Black. Two lab kids, a weretiger, an orphan, and a fish. *Wow.* God's sense of humor must have been truly fucked up.

"Fine, fine," he relented, his irritation melting away as he stuck his hands in the sleeves of his yukata. It was going to be a long night, and the last thing he wanted was to damage-control three competitive idiots and a little Singularity. "Let's go catch some goldfish, then."

With Sonoko's laughter filling the air as she begged Atsushi to '*do the kitty'* ("She's asking him to turn into a weretiger," Dazai explained under his breath, hovering way too close to Chuuya's ear), the group ventured back into the festival.

When Dazai tasked them with entertaining Sonoko, Akutagawa and Atsushi turned it into a competition. Chuuya bet that the bastard expected as much.

In turn, the child grew more demanding as they went on.

What Akutagawa could do with a bottomless budget and the knowledge of having a younger sister, Atsushi compensated with a lifelong experience of making younger children laugh at the orphanage. And he was a *kitten:* abilities didn't get much cuter than that.

It was then that Rashomon turned into a black, cutesy dragon, with big red eyes and letting out a soft purr, like a house cat. *That* was a new side of Rashomon Chuuya had never witnessed before.

For the first time, with Dazai by his side, he found that he could rest.

With an ocean of people hiding them and the humid heat sticking to his bandages, Dazai felt oddly relaxed. He was enjoying the muffled sounds of the crowd, head thrown back to face the sky as he sat on a bench, when Chuuya joined him again. He'd gone to a vending machine nearby, and Dazai didn't investigate further. Having *Shin Soukoku* around meant they had found their babysitters for the night, and Dazai was certainly not going to complain.

It had been a while since he and Chuuya had visited a summer festival.

Without looking at him directly, the executive handed him a cold can of honey tea. Dazai accepted it with a nod of his head. Condensation dripped under his fingertips; cold, prickling at the pads of his fingers like invisible nails.

He felt the way Chuuya glanced sideways at him. More stolen silences, more paper cuts on his skin. The executive opened his mouth, then closed it. He opened it again.

"What is this? You buy me a can of tea and don't get anything for yourself?" Dazai asked. He meant to break the ice, but it only caused Chuuya to click his tongue.

"It's a bribe."

Dazai snorted. "I see."

"The fuck are you scheming?"

"What do you mean?"

"You were supposed to be working tonight."

Right. So they weren't going to talk about the tea or the child or the festival after all. Dazai leaned back, and he wore a grin he *knew* would rub Chuuya the wrong way. "And here I am; a diligent employee who finished his work on time. Kunikida's crying of joy."

"Be for fucking real."

"I'm serious," he insisted, ignoring how Chuuya scoffed. He crossed his legs and loaded another lie. "And I'm being honest when I say I have no intentions of causing trouble tonight. Pinky promise."

"As if I didn't know that this is exactly *what* you'd say to spite me. All you do is piss in my mouth and tell me it's raining."

"My, Chuuya. I didn't know you had such peculiar tastes~"

"Fuck you," Chuuya answered. Dazai flashed him a cheeky smile.

He saw how carefully Chuuya picked his words, measuring his sentences, expecting an emotional punch in return, and he relished every second of it; he loved to see Chuuya dancing on eggshells, relying on him to not slip. He loved to peek at the insecurity surfacing in his partner's movements because, around him, Dazai felt insecure all the time. It was a natural state.

“Look, seriously, you are really overthinking it. Atsushi and I finished work early today, and I thought I'd surprise Sonoko.”

Chuuya rolled his eyes. "If that’s true, you could've given me a heads-up."

“I tried to text you.”

“You said you were going to cut a job short, that’s all you said.”

“After that.”

“You sent me a fucking snail emoji.”

“And I would have added more if Chuuya had answered,” Dazai said. It was, surprisingly, the truth.

*“*Then why are you here? You didn’t have to. Just take the night off and fuck off.”

I wanted to see you, Dazai thought. He couldn’t help it. He would have said it and it would have been an admission, fair and square, but something in the way Chuuya’s jawbone locked tighter told him it would not have been appreciated. “You’re snappy. What happened?”

Chuuya's jaw tightened. “The Tanizaki girl,” he said then — voice lower. “She started blabbing about love and shit to Sonoko.”

“Oh,” Dazai said.

“She’s gotta stop before the kid gets really confused. She is young, for fuck’s sake. And, with her ability and all, she needs to understand that *she* controls emotions and emotions don’t control her.” He stopped and inhaled. “Pillow Diaries *doesn’t* control her.”

“I see. I’ll talk to Naomi-chan.”

“Thanks.”

“I don’t take Sonoko to the Agency to expose her to this kind of discourse, by the way. I take her to the Agency so she feels empowered to talk about her ability.”

“I know.”

“And I don’t do it for some tug-of-war scheme between our organizations,” Dazai insisted. It felt important. “I just want her to see how people can help others.”

Slowly, Chuuya’s head tilted to the side. “You wanna give her options.”

“I suppose so, yes. So she can become a better adult.”

“Are we fucking things up, ya think?” Chuuya murmured, his voice tinged with a touch of frustration as he ran a hand through his hair; it had become longer, lately. Dazai wanted to

touch it, to run his fingers through auburn locks. "With Sonoko. I didn't think this far ahead when I took her in."

"You could have run away."

"Running would have been a shit move."

"It would have been understandable, but you *didn't."* Dazai's gaze shifted to Chuuya, a glimpse of seriousness in his eyes. "You're doing a great job. That child is lucky to have you."

Chuuya's fingers tapped nervously against his knee, his gaze locked on some distant spot in the crowd. "Maybe I've made a mistake. Should've let Boss handle things with ya."

"Chuuya," he murmured. "Have we ever failed a mission?"

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken emotions. *We.*

"We kinda failed, though. In general."

"Do you think so?"

"Yeah." *That* hurt — the absolute certainty in Chuuya's voice, the poise in his eyes. "We work well together still, but we couldn't stick together. We failed, and maybe those two won't; Double Black, loud edition."

"That does not mean we failed," Dazai insisted.

He needed to make that point, or he'd never forgive himself — but then Chuuya smiled, and it broke his heart. It was the smile of someone who had learned to work alone.

"We did, or you wouldn't need a replacement."

"I'm not replacing us, Chuuya. That was never the plan."

"Then maybe *that* should be the plan, because Yokohama could use a goddamn functional Double Black. Especially since we're not working together anymore, and those two have the perfect Abilities for this kind of partnership. They're gonna do a good job. They're gonna be good partners."

"That's an unkind thing to say after I let you shoot me in the head, you know? I'm still the partner who knows Chuuya best."

"Dazai," Chuuya said, a sound that trickled down Dazai's spine like a drop of molasses. "You're a *traitor."*

"I'm loyal to you."

"I guess you are, yes. And I am loyal to you too — but do you *see* how that cannot work forever, in this world? What if the truce blows up?"

"We'll find a way."

"You and your President said you don't want to work with Boss, though. Ya can't collaborate with *me* but not with the Port Mafia, that's not how it fuckin' works. Besides, where was that loyalty to *me* when you left the organization?" Chuuya volleyed back, his voice painfully leveled. "I don't mean that I wanted you to stay, for the record. I don't care where you are, or who you work for. But I had hoped you would have talked to me before leaving— so I'd know you were okay." Chuuya sighed, running a hand through his hair. Red suited him, Dazai thought. "The day you left, I was bringing you groceries. I brought you my favorite movie and I know it was a shit way of making you forget you were mourning your best friend, but I figured I'd try to help. Guess you didn't need it."

"No," he murmured. "I didn't."

"I found the room empty, so I waited."

I waited until I realized you weren't coming back.

"I'm sorry."

"Ya know, I remember thinking it was all good. Your fridge was empty, so at least you had eaten actual food before you left. Silver linings, am I right?"

His voice trailed off, and Dazai looked at him and realized he had forgotten how to breathe. Wasn't it interesting, how someone else could take control of his body, of his flesh, of the air in his lungs and the heart pumping his blood?
Every time, Dazai looked at Chuuya and *folded.* He looked at sapphire-blue eyes and, like a dog, like a sinner, he surrendered.

He shifted closer on the bench, his fingers brushing against Chuuya's.

His eyes dropped, landing on Chuuya's mouth.
He looked at the pink, plump flesh, and how the man was chewing at his own bottom lip — and he touched his thumb to it, gently, and wondered what would have happened if he leaned forward and kissed Chuuya. How would it feel to utter every truth against those lips? Instead, he took a breath.

"Chuuya, I..."

I didn't know it, but I'm grateful, he thought. It died on his lips, thawing like snow in spring.

I should have asked you to leave with me, but I couldn't. I couldn't risk you, too.

He teetered on the brink of a confession, tiptoeing the line between cowardice and foolery.

Chuuya stood so impossibly still, eyes wide like a rabbit looking at the fox, the gap between them imperceptibly shrinking, Dazai braced for rejection and pushed forth.
Their faces lingered mere inches apart, their breaths mingling. Dazai could sense the body warmth oozing from his partner, enveloping him like a blanket. Like a caress without touch.

Inhaling around the knot in his throat, he felt as though the world held its breath along with them.
It reminded Dazai of a younger time, of a countryside and a sky and a kiss. An old kind of damaged boyhood resurfaced.

His gaze flickered between Chuuya's eyes and lips, a maddening indecision holding him back. He couldn't, he told himself. He *couldn't* risk it, baring the cracked skeleton of his desire and scattering his shameful dreams in the infinite inches that separated him and Chuuya.

He pulled back slightly.

"I'm sorry, I..." Dazai's voice trailed off, and he withdrew. He found himself unable to voice out what he truly wanted to say. "I'm sorry."

Chuuya flinched and pulled back, too. It felt like looking at a salt statue that had turned human and started moving all of a sudden; a startling, unnatural change of status.

"Huh," the executive said, heart pounding in his ribcage so loudly that Dazai could hear it — *tu-thump, tu-thump* — a mix of frustration and confusion flooding his face. "What's with you tonight? Sorry *this,* sorry *that* — It's not like you."

And yet, he had spent years screaming silent apologies to Chuuya and the other man never heard a single one of them.

"Maybe that's *exactly* like me."

"You don't apologize, Osamu. Not to *me."*

For a long moment, Dazai stared at him and said nothing. He looked at his lips again, studying the soft arc before his gaze traveled up to azure eyes. How he *yearned* to be buried under that blue.

Those merciful, forget-me-not blue irises that ingested all the lights of the cosmos, all the stars and the planets and the *life* of the universe. Black holes, dead blue. In them, he discerned an emotion so raw and hungry that it scared him — and yet none of that came near to what Dazai *craved.*

Partners, never friends.

Rivals, never lovers.

"Ah, that… That's unfair, you know," Dazai said, a joyless grin baring his teeth. "Being so rude about an apology. You make it sound personal."

"Is it not?"

"I'm just not that great at apologies in general. It has nothing to do with you."

He heard nothing but Chuuya's heart drumming between their bodies.

Tu-thump.

Tu-thump.

“It’s not personal, huh,” Chuuya echoed.

Dazai nodded. It felt like a lie, though.

Maybe it had been personal all along, for he could hardly find a different word for these confusing feelings that he stored in his heart. The ache had become so common, so constant, it didn’t bother him anymore.
He lived with a broken heart and carried his fear in his pocket like a medal: Dazai Osamu, king of cowards, prince of bastards. Honest, sometimes.

In love with his partner, always.

But the moment had passed.

They sat on the bench, their shoulders almost touching as their gazes wandered elsewhere. In silence. *Intimately distant.*

—

Chuuya looked unfairly gorgeous, clad in his indigo kimono. It brought out all the shades of midwinter blue in his eyes when the air was crisp and the wind swept away the clouds for long enough to reveal a crystal-clear, blinding expanse of azure.

Dazai was wearing an understated mauve yukata, in turn, the brown sash keeping the baggy fabric secured around his waist. He felt the cotton against the bandages as if the gauze and the clothes were keeping his bones stitched together. His skin was useless like that. It did nothing to keep all his pieces in place.

Without the bandages, he might have fallen apart.

“Should we take Sonoko to Mount Fuji?” Chuuya asked, scrolling down through an online guide of the region. He didn’t even raise his eyes from his phone as he fired the question.

They had decided to take a stroll near Pacifico Yokohama to enjoy the sunshine and pleasant breeze, and decided to stop by a public park on their way back. They had taken control of a sun-soaked bench, sitting side by side, their lazy discussion rippling through the otherwise silent surroundings.

“Why Mount Fuji?” Dazai asked, the retort met only with half a shrug.

“We could go sightseeing, take the kiddo to the onsen or something. I hear there’s a mountain pass with a nice hotel, and the food is nice. Their seasonal kaiseki is pretty decent, too.”

“We can also sightsee in Yokohama.”

“Mount Fuji would be nice, though.”

“Mount Fuji is boring,” Dazai countered.

He despised hiking, anyway, and had no intention of risking slipping on a rock or stepping on a viper. “I stayed there for a few weeks while I was in hiding, at a quiet pass that is known to be rather charming. Did I ever tell you?” *Ah, he supposed not. He never told Chuuya much, did he?* “I got bored out of my mind. And I fooled around with a girl who ended up misinterpreting my intentions, so now she hates me. Frankly, I’d rather not go anywhere near that place.”

“Ah, right. I should have guessed.”

“She swore she’d kill me if I ever showed my face again.”

“What’s new?” Chuuya asked — but his voice held no bite. He scrolled down for a few more moments, thumb tapping idly on the luminescent screen of his phone. “Well, that can’t be helped, then. What about Nara?”

As he half-heartedly listened to Chuuya listing destinations in and out of Japan, Dazai realized something: he had known the man next to him for seven years and not once, not *a single* time, had they planned a vacation together.
It suddenly felt depressing. He eventually accepted to go to Mount Fuji — a day trip, though: that remained his only demand — and Chuuya rewarded him with a smile.

It was the most blazing beam Dazai had ever seen.

—

A poorly kept secret was that Dazai Osamu labeled himself an enthusiastic appreciator of all women, and worked hard to be remembered as such.

A better-kept secret, however, was that Dazai had been madly in love with his partner — his play-pretend husband — for his entire life.

He had loved Chuuya since the very *first* second of the very *first* meeting, the feeling creeping up on him like a hurricane on a summer day. He didn’t set foot in Suribachi to fall in love, yet his heart ruled otherwise.

Tenaciously, he’d loved him for seven years.

Dazai thought he had tamed that longing, and hoped that four years of separation would do the trick and free him. No heart can be resilient enough to insist on something helpless for years, right? That would have been masochistic. As it turned out, he had underestimated his own stubbornness.

He tried to get rid of this love that hurt him so, but pain loved him.

Trying to avoid any jerky movement while settling with his back against the headboard of Chuuya’s bed, Dazai looked at his partner and Sonoko sleeping. The bed was big enough to fit all three of them comfortably.

The executive had sprawled his body across the mattress while the child was starfishing, hands and legs all over, taking most of the space with her little frame. Chuuya was touching her hand.

He held onto her almost in fear she might have discovered Corruption in her sleep.

Even drooling on the pillow and with eyelashes flickering as he chased after a dreamless sleep, Chuuya was the most beautiful sight Dazai had ever laid his gaze upon.

He possessed a lively kind of greediness, Chuuya, as if he could have eaten the world in handfuls and asked for another helping. He was thunder, he was sound and movement, he was humanity in its rawest form.

Little did Chuuya know that he was the reason Dazai had still not killed himself.

—

"Chuuya-san!"

Here it goes again.

Dazai had to keep himself physically from rolling his eyes. In the last few weeks, every time he and Chuuya took Sonoko to school, he had familiarized himself with the chirping chants of women on the prowl for young blood.

The way all the mothers called out Chuuya's name might have passed for cheerful at first, yet it was everything but to a more attentive ear. It was *ravaging*.

The procession of women in the kindergarten's yard, all occupied in the daily regime of dropping off their spawns to school with the alacrity of worshippers in a temple, carried the sweet reek of *death.* Death of intimacy, death of expectations, death of sexual tension after their marriage had stretched for too long and, somewhere along the twist, lost its pulse. Flatlined. Done for.

Now.

Dazai was aware that the women chatting them up were not-so-secretly lusting over Chuuya. They wanted Nakahara Chuuya. It was a fact. It would have been a rather unruffled statement, just like the fact that said women didn't believe their husbands were betraying them as they spent their paychecks with sex workers (check the stats, if you dare) or that they had resigned from their over-demanding jobs to make sure their children (aged 3 to 6) would remain their only accomplishment in life.

Sad as they might have been, unfair as they *certainly* were, the above were all facts.

Not that Dazai ever deluded himself that he would be the only person on God's green earth with a crush on Chuuya.

He used to elbow his way into his partner's affection when they were younger and, with the redhead growing more fit, handsome and charismatic, the Nakahara Fan Club only grew

more crowded as the days went by.
A child was only bound to worsen the situation, making Chuuya appear more relatable — and, by extension, reachable.

Cue *them:* the mothers.

It wasn't even seven in the morning and Dazai already craved to throw himself into the river; accomplishments had been made. At this pace, he might have managed to die by the end of the month.

The second he and Chuuya crossed the school's gate without Sonoko, the group of mothers (at least, the one Dazai individuated as the *alpha* mothers, who organized cupcake sales or orchestrated who accessed cram school and who didn't) approached them like a pack of hungry dogs. As always, too, their greetings and not-so-subtle fawning were aimed at Chuuya and flying over Dazai's head (which was a funny thing indeed, since he was far taller than a *Chibikko).*

"Good morning, Chuuya-san!" one mother chirped.

Another one waved her manicured hand at the redhead, her permed dark hair brushing her cheekbones as her face opened in a cutesy beam. "Ah, Chuuya-san!"

"Hello, Chuuya-san!" another chimed in, bowing her head.

"Chuuya-san!"

Instantly, petty jealousy gripped Dazai's heart.

And, like every *damn* morning, Chuuya greeted them with a gracious smile and a dip of his hat.

"Mornin'," he answered the group. "How's everyone today?"

"We're good, how are you?"

"How is Sonoko-chan? Oh my, she looked adorable in her little dress! Such a well-behaved girl!"

"I wish my husband would drop Yoshiki to school sometimes, too…"

Disgusting. Dazai rolled his eyes, fidgeting with the belt of his trench coat like a makeshift lariat.
God really had a funny sense of humor. His charm, beauty, and main character energy withered the second he appeared next to a chibi-sized *mother hen*.

Technically, he should have overshadowed Chuuya; literally, too, considering his several-height-gap of advantage and widely talked about, reiterated, *gargantuan* love for all women.

How was that fair? Chuuya had no interest in women whatsoever yet every front yard conversation, group chat, and gossip circle revolved around Chuuya. What a waste.

All this attention for silly, tacky, rude Chuuya; *his* Chuuya.
The man with whom Dazai woke up every day (for the mission), and with whom he shared his dinner table (always for the mission) and had a child (more or less) with (once again, for the mission).

Not that Chuuya belonged to Dazai in any way, of course. Nakahara Chuuya belonged to him only in *possibility.*
Such detail turned Dazai into — frankly speaking and in sophisticated terms — a sore loser and a bitter bitch.

“You look so charming today, Chuuya-san.”

“Have you done something to your hair?”

“I’ve swapped my hat’s chain,” Chuuya said, pointing at the brim of his hat with a grin. “Thanks for noticing.”

“Ah, it looks so stylish!”

“Where did you buy it?”

“Was it expensive? I was on Pinterest, and I saw this chain—”

Again, Dazai tch-ed from the sidelines.

Keeping himself from parroting the conversation was shaving off all his self-control and then some more. He had noticed the chain first, as befitting of an attentive partner, even if Chuuya called him a stalker and told him to piss off — which might or might not have happened because Dazai’s words were, verbatim: ‘Did you think a new chain would make that tacky hat less tacky? Pity it didn’t work~’

So.

Yes.

Maybe it *was* his fault if he and Chuuya had spent the morning in a Cold War over a stupid chain that wasn’t even important. But such was their love language: acts of annoyance and words of ridicule.

As the women continued to chat with Chuuya, Dazai's pout grew more pronounced. He folded his arms, irritation simmering just beneath the surface of his well-behaved mask.

He decided he had enough when a woman in a two-piece suit hunched over Chuuya’s smartphone, pointing him to a Pinterest board called ‘knitting for beginners’.

Chuuya had *no* interest in knitting except for stabbing people; he didn’t enjoy baking and didn’t need cupcake molds shaped like Sonoko’s name. He was just pretending he enjoyed it all. Dazai was— well, *mostly* sure of it.
Telling himself that his partner secretly hated it as much as he did made the entire circus more *bearable.*

However, if he had to be tortured in the morning, Dazai would have rather gone to the Agency early and picked up some paperwork he'd left to rot.

So he slipped the phone out of his pocket, tapped on the screen, and walked away as he pressed the object to his ear.

"Mori-san~" he sing-songed as he quickly stepped away. He suddenly felt Chuuya's attention on him.

"Ha? *Boss?"*

Dazai waved him away. "Ah. Yes — I understand. Annoying. Pity I don't care."

"What's annoying?" Chuuya asked in his direction, which was once again ignored.

The mothers seemed to notice Dazai only as he stole Chuuya's attention and threatened to yank away their toy. Dazai nodded again to the phone, humming as required, bowing his head in understanding. '*Pity,'* he said, and '*I see'* and '*yes, he will be there soon'*. He sensed Chuuya grow more tense with every word that rolled out of his mouth.

When he clicked the call close and joined the group again, the redhead looked practically ready to snatch the phone from his hands. He had that tense energy of a chihuahua, all stretched nerves and jerky movements.

"What was that?"

Dazai forced a smile as he waved his phone. "We really should be going."

Chuuya frowned.

"Why is Boss calling you?"

"Beats me."

He shrugged off the question even though they *both* knew the answer: in a world turned chessboard, Mori still valued Dazai above all. His knight, his *heir*.
That was why he still called a traitor to summon an executive, ass-backward as it might have sounded.

Chuuya nodded with a tinge of reluctance in his eyes and stepped away from the group of mothers. He promised to send them the link to whatever he was showing them — Dazai didn't really *care* — and they pouted and cooed, asking them if everything was alright at work. They went as far as offering to help with Sonoko for the afternoon, organizing a playdate for some of the kids.

Chuuya was still smiling — that sunshine beam that somehow soured Dazai's mood — when Dazai bowed to excuse himself and started walking away. He didn't wait for his partner, confident enough Chuuya would follow him. He *always* did.

On cue, the executive bid farewell to the mothers, promising to chat more next time, and followed Dazai out of the school building.

Dazai's stance relaxed only once they found themselves alone. He pillowed his head with his arms as they walked down the street, ignoring the uneasy glances he and Chuuya attracted as they walked out of a school's gate.

Two *fathers*.
Surely stranger things had happened in the world, yet people looked at them as if they were aliens.

Every time he felt the sly judgment of strangers sticking to his skin, Dazai urged himself to dish out kindness in return, hoping it would ruin their day. He wasn't even Sonoko's real father — he was a passerby in her life, a big brother and guardian, and yet people thought they had a right to judge.

They thought they knew everything. How risible.
People, as a rule, knew nothing.

"Chuuya seemed to be having quite a good time back there, flirting with all those agreeable women," he commented eventually, forcing his voice into nonchalance. "I didn't realize your taste was so pedestrian."

Forcing a certain amount of fake cheerfulness into his stance and steps was easy; doing the same with his voice, not so much.

Chuuya's lips twitched up. It formed a dimple on one cheek, almost imperceptible — cocky, *kissable*. God, Dazai hated that kissable mouth of a bastard.

"Jealous much, dumbass?"

He turned away, pouting. "Maybe. Maybe not. I don't like how Chuuya is stealing all the women for himself—"

"As if I care."

"—But it's not like you to be so friendly with people you barely know," he added, voice falling quieter.

The way Chuuya chuckled was all kinds of unfair. In fact, it was downright mean because he sounded almost as if he found the jealousy endearing — as if he'd discovered a puppy in Dazai's lone wolf act. "Yeah, sure. So what's the matter? Hate to share the spotlight when we're around women, bastard?"

Dazai shuddered. "It's not that."

"Then what is it? Because I don't get it." He frowned, too, and gestured in the general direction of Dazai's face. "And I don't get why you would *fake* a call from Boss to drag me away from a bunch of civilians."

Ah. So he knew.

Dazai's pout softened into a sheepish smile, and he lowered his arms. He let them fall by his sides, suddenly emptied of his strength — aware that it was early morning and he didn't want to spend the day bickering. "I don't like my dog paying too much attention to other people."

"I'm not your pet. Stop being delusional."

"So you say, yet I remember someone waiting for me at Meursault to fulfill their promise to be my dog for life."

"I'm gonna kill you for real if you keep up like this. *God,* move on already — you make me want to murder you."

Dazai's tension eased, and he returned Chuuya's smile with genuine affection. "That's interesting. How would Chuuya kill me? Poison?"

Chuuya shrugged. They were both immune to most poisons, having built their resistance to drugs and toxins while ingesting one almost-deadly pill at a time for years.

"Maybe."

"It would be easy, now that I think about it. I only eat the food Chuuya cooks for me."

"Then cook your own food, you bitch," the executive growled — but it was good-natured, light. He always enjoyed feeding other people, Chuuya. "It's not my fault that your broke ass has expensive taste, even though you keep living one paycheck away from bankruptcy."

Dazai squealed, lifting a hand to his face and dramatically slapping it over his mouth. "That is not true!"

Chuuya shot him a glare. "Very true."

"Ah, so now Chibi's being petty and refusing to feed me. How cruel."

"How am I refusing ya anything if you just help yourself to everything in my house?"

Dazai winked. "*Our* house."

"No way?! It's temporary!"

They might have continued bickering until the train station, at that pace. They could have parted ways on agreeable terms if Dazai had tried to act more patient and less ruthlessly unpleasant. , but Dazai had never been a patient man.

The second he sensed Chuuya's guard dropping, he pulled the executive into an alley. He pinned him against the wall, sliding one leg in between his partner's knees to keep him from struggling. And what a gorgeous view he'd won for himself — Chuuya, his gorgeous Chuuya, gawking as Dazai towered over him and caged him between the wall and his body. It *truly* rivaled any masterpiece.

Dazai glanced down at the executive, and he could mirror himself in the indigo of his irises.

"Just a piece of advice," he crooned, lowering down on Chuuya until his mouth grazed the man's ear shell — his tone heavy, his eyes clouded. "Try not to flirt around too much. I might get jealous."

Chuuya wriggled half-heartedly. He was too surprised to react, Dazai supposed, because the executive could have thrust him to the other end of the alley with a flick of his pinkie if he *truly* wanted to.

"What— Are you *insane?"*

Dazai hummed, his grin widening as he made a display of checking him out. "Well, it's a possibility, isn't it?"

"Get off me."

"Don't insult me, now; you could easily force me away."

Chuuya's hands twitched in his grip. He could sense his heartbeat under his palms, every pump of blood ricocheting inside his body. He could have since Dazai wasn't truly keeping him restrained, but Chuuya wasn't pushing him away. *Why* wasn't he?

"I could, sure. I could smash your face with a punch. But seeing you like this is more interesting," Chuuya said, his teasing grin dropping a self-assurance that twisted Dazai's belly. It was a *good* twist, the kind that smeared warmth all over his senses. "What's the issue? Do you feel ignored, bastard?"

"Please, you are being nonsensical."

"You're the one pinning me to a wall."

"Because you piss me off, Chuuya." He schooled his tone to dip, the condescending undertones honey-sweet in his lilt. "You piss me off a *lot."*

"Ya mad at me? Good. I hope it makes your day absolutely miserable."

Dazai's smile sharpened. "Being around Chuuya makes me miserable all day every day."

"Yet here you are."

"H'm. And how *am* I, Chuuya?"

"Close. Too close, enough that I can feel your pulse — I can rip your heart out with just one move, because you are so, so—" Chuuya pushed against him as if to challenge Dazai to crumble first. He tilted his chin up. "—So. Damn. *Close."* His eyes darkened. With a jerk, he freed one of his hands — wolfish, quick fingers that quickly hooked around Dazai's nape. He grabbed a fistful of black curls and pushed him down. "Didn't you say I disgust you, *darling*?"

The sing-songed epithet — *anata,* a name so sweet denuded of its worth — dripped venom.

“You do, yes,” Dazai let out. His own voice sounded deeper, way too throaty and tempting for a public place. It *felt* like dipping his toes in warm blood. “I really hate Chuuya.”

“Then get off me, dickface. Men on death’s door are not my speed.”

“Apparently, married mothers of young kids are, though. How naughty.”

“You’re being absurd.”

“So what? Are you going to kill me, if I piss you off enough? You’ve got your knives right here.” His hand traveled down to the sheath under Chuuya’s shirt, right on his hip. He felt the man shiver. “Come on. Kill me.”

Chuuya gritted his teeth. “Trust me, I want to.”

“Then do it.” He flashed him a half-lidded grin. “Find a use for that pretty blade of yours— unless you are afraid of the consequences?”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Ah. That’s hardly news.”

“What the—”

He lowered to the level of Chuuya’s ear again, nose sunk in red hair and dry as he brushed against his earlobe. He kept his touch fondant as he lifted one hand to brush the tip of his thumb to the man’s chin. “I may be insane, but *you* are my dog for life, Chuuya,” he whispered. His tone was heavier than velvet and his mouth hovered so close he could feel the shiver that traveled through Chuuya. “Our fates are tied. And a good dog should not forget who their master is.”

It reverberated between them — in their infinite closeness, in Dazai’s damp breath, causing goosebumps to bloom on Chuuya’s skin — like a curse. Like a prophecy.

They could never escape each other.

On cue, Chuuya shoved him away. ‘*Get off me,’* he mumbled, and Dazai gave up resisting while still wearing a caustic grin on his lips.

“As you wish, husband,” he said, amiable, showing both his hands in a display of innocence and smiling as the redhead walked away.

I’d kill anyone who lands a hand on you, he truly wanted to say.

Because Chuuya had a point of calling him a bastard, with possessiveness flowing in his veins like poison. It flickered in his heart every time he saw Chuuya with someone else — because his affection was painted green, jealousy overspilling every time he imagined his dog

with someone else. He had a perfect understanding of the executive, and that was that. He knew *his* Chuuya.

Partner. Enemy. *So much more.*

Chapter End Notes

As always, major thanks to Ceres, Kat and Malaika for the beta reading!

Come and say hi on Twitter and let me know if you liked the chapter. Kudos and comments make my day, and I can't wait to hear your thoughts ❤️ Emojis count, of course 😌

Long Overdue

Chapter Summary

"You have my answer," Dazai said. "I'll wait for yours."

Or: of bar fights and love confessions

Chapter Notes

As always, major thanks to the wonderful Ceres and Malaika for beta-reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To Dazai life felt, at times, like watching the world from the ragged surface of the ocean.

No person in their right mind would have trusted the ocean. No one who actually knew it, anyway. In the same way, he couldn't trust his eyes, his senses, or himself.

He *should* not trust himself.

Part of his sharpness came from a constant vigilance, a relentless questioning of the reality that surrounded him. Nothing escaped him: everything was analyzed, scrutinized, and dissected. He sank his bare hands into the carcass of reality, bloodied to the elbows, like a butcher inspecting freshly killed game.

What if the things he was seeing – the things he was *feeling* – had been irreparably damaged by the lenses of his inadequacy?

He was a blind person wandering with eyes wide open, fingers hooked like claws to grasp at the occasional scrap of solace life threw at him. Although life never satisfied him, it was just enough to keep himself alive. Take one Nakahara Chuuya, for example: partner, unattainable dream, occasional nightmare.

For a man who could not dream, he sure liked to plague Dazai's nights. Not that Chuuya ever *admitted* his lack of dreams to him openly, proud creature that he was; Dazai had deduced it from the lack of the natural motion of a human slipping into a dream.

Chuuya also had a nice house. He had good taste in artwork, interior design, and amenities. He also had good taste in men, Dazai supposed, because the executive always made a point of staying the hell away from him. He never dipped a single toe in the unreliable ocean of Dazai's existence.

Dazai could not blame him. If anything, he respected the survival instinct.

At least, from the floor-to-ceiling windows of his old partner's penthouse, Dazai could find some form of solace in the majestic view of Yokohama's skyline – the Cosmo Clock 21 and Yokohama Marine Tower, the skyscrapers, the towering Port Mafia buildings.

Sometimes, he wondered when the Great War turned the city into concrete and glass. Yokohama wasn't always like that — a simple harbor city he'd never known, built from wood and sweat.

How did Yokohama feel in the ancient days? Now, the port was a criminal paradise.

Yet, the city *still* mirrored itself in the cut-glass surface of the ocean as if it longed to drown all its inhabitants, as if it wanted nothing but to turn into a mythical Atlantis and disappear off the map. Water everywhere. Cold. Unmerciful. *Freeing.*

Ah, he was starting to sound like Fyodor.

"Dazai-nii, the water is warm!"

"I'm sure it is," he said, not wasting a moment to flinch; instead, he moved closer to the hot tub on Chuuya's obscenely lavish terrace, squatting by the tub's faux-wood edge. He schooled his face into a smile. It was a mask covering a chasm, but no one ever minded. "Do you like it, princess?"

"Yes," Sonoko chirped.

Chuuya was lounging on a chair, legs crossed and a glass of plum-colored wine in hand. The liquid had painted his lips a darker shade of pink, almost as if a ghost had kissed them to the point of bleeding.

Dazai sat more comfortably on the side of the executive's hot tub — which Sonoko had elected as her favorite toy for her evening — and dipped a finger in the water. "If you behave, we're going to fill this with soap and have a bubble battle."

"Like heck we will," Chuuya cut him off. Dazai dutifully ignored him.

" *Chuuya* will also buy you a rubber duck." He splashed Sonoko's face, flicking the surface of the water, and she squealed.

The waves of her laughter danced around the terrace, flying into the night.

She was wearing a vibrant pink swimsuit Kouyou had picked out for her, and splashed around in the warm water without a care in the world. Dazai had found that he *liked* it. Her cries of joy filled the space.

"I'm glad you like it, kiddo," Chuuya hummed.

"Ah~ I can't believe Chuuya has a *hot tub* and never invited me."

“Shut up, Bandages. Why should I invite *you?”*

With a woeful moan, Dazai slapped a hand onto his chest. “Because we’re friends.”

“We absolutely are not,” Chuuya said, without missing a beat. He took a sip of the wine as if to buy time. “I never used the stupid hot tub anyway. It just came with the house.”

A part of Dazai longed to show the redhead all the uses such a tub could have – the relaxing, the fun, and the *filthy.* If he closed his eyes, he could still remember the wave of scorching anticipation rushing down his spine during the summer festival, when he teetered on the edge of a confession.

But that was then, and this was *now.*

Dazai’s eyes sparkled with mischief as he scooped up some of the warm water and splashed it in Sonoko’s direction.

His rolled-up sleeve slipped down a little with the gesture, water wetting his bandages and seeping through the gauze. Sonoko was too busy with her games, scooping up water and splashing him with it to care. The child didn’t question his bandages, she accepted them as a part of him.

“Stop!” She squealed, followed by a little *gyah* that, instead, encouraged Dazai to splash her again. She laughed louder. His heart sang.

The sound of Sonoko’s voice echoed through the terrace, filling his ribcage with an unknown feeling of contentment. It was a pitiful little muscle, Dazai’s heart — as empty as his Agency’s dorm room — but the sense of purpose of being around Sonoko filled it.
He wondered if Odasaku, too, had been taking in orphans for that same reason: to find a reason to live on after the world had damaged him beyond salvation.

Once again, he playfully splashed Sonoko and basked in the warmth of her laughter. When she let out a cry more high-pitched than the rest, Chuuya perked up from his chair.

“Everything okay, kiddo?” He asked, and Dazai couldn’t even bring himself to be offended by the apprehension. *Such a mama bear.*

She nodded so deeply that she ended up nose-deep in the water. “H’m.”

“Ya tell me if you want to get out, okay?”

“No— Dazai-nii is being silly~”

“Ain’t that his goddamn personality,” Chuuya mumbled, coaxing a giggle out of Dazai. He turned and winked at his partner, smiling as he saw the redhead shake his head.

“See, princess, Chuuya-nii says that, but he likes it when I act silly.”

“No, I actually don’t.”

“Liar,” Dazai sing-songed.

After a moment of stretched silence, he realized that the executive’s attention had wandered to the city, blue eyes turned purple in the reflection of a thousand dying stars.

And Dazai, distracted by the sight, admired his partner as one admired a painting — with a certain degree of distance, deluging his mute adoration waxing silent lyrical from behind a glass.

Suddenly, the hot tub didn’t really matter anymore. Instead, Dazai drank in the curls falling down Chuuya’s muscular neck in waves of fire and the honed jawbone and the stern profile and the plump Cupid bow. His fingers elegantly wrapped the glass of wine.

Fuck, Dazai thought. How had someone like *him* bagged a partner like *that?* He was damaged, his insides unsightly in every way that mattered, but Chuuya was light. It wounded the eye — not like the sun, but like a biblical angel. The eye-burning kind.

There was something holy in Chuuya. Something man-made, something prideful and arrogant, a tinge of hubris that had flickered from the executive’s mannerism. Maybe it was the leftover touch of the experiments, but Chuuya’s angel-like light wasn’t remote or merciful. It was a wildfire burning everything in its wake. It was the headlights of a truck rushing in Dazai’s direction at full speed, and he could not move and it was too late.

Dazai — a creature made of unreliable ocean water — felt translucent under that light, as if he’d been created only to dissolve in it.

He vaguely registered that Sonoko had dropped back into the hot water with a splash, starting to flail her arms. He didn’t spare but a glance at her games, checking her safety.

The more he looked at Chuuya, the more *tragically* obvious his pining became. A truth that threatened to overspill every time he parted his lips to trade barbs with the man.

He looked at Chuuya and tried to learn the texture of his thoughts, imagining the warmth of his skin. He wondered if in his heart, somewhere, Chuuya had a corner dedicated to him. A stifling, dusty room that belonged only to Dazai. He hoped so because, on his side, Dazai never had a true *home* apart from Chuuya.

Dazai knew nothing about staying, normally. He knew nothing about homes and everything about running away, reinventing himself and rebranding his character. He knew everything about murdering his old self and resurfacing the day after a newborn man. He was an expert in deceit, Dazai Osamu, but Chuuya was always the *solid* part of him. The one that stayed.

He was an earth sign through and through, some would say — he was the ground, gravity well-rooted in the core of the earth. And, all along, while Dazai ran away from himself, Chuuya remained a constant in his storm-tossed life. Slowly, still looking at the executive, Dazai opened his mouth.

Chuuya’s name rested on the tip of his tongue — to say what, exactly, he didn’t know. To call him closer, perhaps. To snatch his attention, maybe, and claim it for himself. To beg Chuuya

to kiss his mouth like he was kissing the rim of his wine glass.

That was when Sonoko splashed a generous wave of water at him.

Stifling a cuss, Dazai jumped away from the tub a fraction of a second too late.

The fuck, he thought.

His head whipped in her direction, sputtering. “Sonoko!” He exclaimed, spots of his shirt glued to his bandaged skin — and he was ready to snap at her, but he stopped when he saw her pout.

“Dazai-nii wasn’t listening.”

“No, I was—“ *Pining?* Yeah, no way he was going to admit that. “I got distracted.”

“It’s important!”

Dazai let out a small sigh, relaxing back against the tub’s ledge. “I bet.”

“Chuuya-nii is funny,” she said, leaning closer as if she was letting him in on a secret.

Since her ability didn’t work on Dazai, she had taken on the task of letting him in on every emotion she eavesdropped on. *Especially* when they involved Chuuya.

Dazai’s eyebrows disappeared behind his fringe. “Why is that?”

“His thoughts are dancing. They are light.”

“That’s the wine,” Dazai hummed, lips curling up as he realized where the conversation was headed.

“Is he drunky?”

“I suppose? Chuuya is a lightweight, which happens when adults drink and get all funny and giddy, but he likes his wine.”

“Like he likes Dazai-nii?”

Dazai could *feel* how the man froze a few meters away, perking up. “Oi! I don’t—” the executive only said as his mind fought the comment and searched for a way to twist it into an insult. Chuuya didn’t usually mince his words.

“Does he, now?” Dazai grinned.

“And he’s thinking that he’d want to take a Polaroid, and—” Sonoko stopped and cocked her head to the side like a kitten. Her smile turned into a scowl. “...Huh. What’s a *polaroid?”*

Dazai laughed.

“I’ll show you tomorrow. Ne, Chuuya, shall we buy a Polaroid camera for the princess?”

“With your money, vagabond,” Chuuya said.

“With my money,” he agreed.

And we will take all the family pictures she wants.

—

After being outed like that, Chuuya had to explain to Sonoko that he had wanted to take a picture because he liked how *both* she and Dazai had been acting. He found it cute, and that was all. It had nothing to do with Dazai. *Clearly.*

The truth was that, after many years of partnership, he’d never seen Dazai act so at ease.

It had surprised the executive to hear that the Agency had accepted, and now and again made good use of, Dazai’s ability to work with children. He had no idea.

‘It happened once when he had just joined,’ Akiko explained to him. ‘Dazai reassured a child during an emergency landing. Ever since that moment, we all kind of *knew.’*

The revelation sparked an uneasy feeling in Chuuya.

He was happy for Dazai, of course. He was happy his new colleagues had acknowledged his soft side, but the realization of not being the *only* person to know his partner gutted him.

That was why he had excused himself for a cigarette break while Dazai put Sonoko to bed. He needed to collect his feelings, breathe around the Polaroid-gate and make sense of it.

The silence pervading the terrace felt unbearably eerie without Sonoko’s laughter filling it. Chuuya looked at the city underneath while resting against the handrail, a cigarette between his fingers, wisps of smoke spiraling into the night. He mostly smoked Golden Bats, and solely to enjoy their fragrance. Dazai didn’t care *where* he took his cigarette break, hands fumbling with some kind of nervy anticipation every time he got anxious and needed a smoke to placate his nerves. Chuuya, instead, could only smoke outside.

His heart rate slowed down as he took a drag. He never used the terrace outside of that simple purpose, though, marching through it with a lighter in his hand and a cigarette between his lips. He was barely aware of the hot tub and soft cushions, of the potted plants and soft fairy lights, but he’d learned to appreciate it with the mission.

The wooden deck beneath his feet felt cool and solid as Chuuya breathed through his nostrils. The night was still, the ocean wind whirring in the distance.

As he exhaled a plume of smoke, the sound of footsteps approached from behind. Chuuya didn't need to turn to know it was Dazai.

He could feel the man’s existence in his marrow.

Chuuya expected to see him changed into a more comfortable attire — usually, a hoodie that had seen better days and baggy, grey pants that hung loosely around his pointy hip bones.

They appeared kept in place only by the bandages.

Chuuya *hated* them with a passion. He also hated how passionately his brain hyperfixated on every inch of Dazai's body.

Instead, as Dazai reached him, he realized the man had slipped on his trench coat, hair combed into a semblance of tidiness.

His eyes briefly met Chuuya's as he rested by his side.

"Sorry about the Polaroid thing," Dazai began, even if it was not his fault at all.

Chuuya flicked the ashes from his cigarette into the emptiness under them, grey fragments dancing in the wind. Then, he took another drag.

"Going out?" He asked instead. He had no intention of addressing it *ever*.

"I already know I won't be able to fall asleep now." Dazai shrugged. "So I'm going to Lupin."

"Ah. Drinking yourself to sleep?"

"I'm told it works."

"I see," Chuuya murmured. He didn't try to stop him — he had no *reason* to. It would have been easy to ask Dazai to stay, but it was also hopeless. Trying to control the man was the fastest way to make him run away.

"So," Dazai settled next to him, a carefree skip in his pause, "Chuuya thinks I'm cute?"

The executive snorted. "You were cute *with* the kiddo."

"I'll take the win."

"There's no win, dickhead. That's different than calling *you* cute."

"It's not that different," Dazai argued. Chuuya wondered if the Polaroid-gate — the way Chuuya *felt* about him, perhaps — was the true reason Dazai was leaving: he'd made things awkward, and now his partner was somewhat repulsed.

"You know what, yeah, maybe you are cute." Chuuya took an inhale of smoke. "I concede."

Dazai bowed playfully. "Why, thank you."

"Don't get used to it, asshole."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"And you know you're good-looking, too. Don't act modest when it's obvious you're smug about it; it's unsightly as heck."

“I thought the whole point was that there’s nothing unsightly about me.”

Chuuya huffed. “Ya know, I’m starting to regret complimenting you.”

“I didn’t expect Chuuya would ever admit such a thing, though.”

“Why not? It’s just facts, and I’ve always been shit at pretending anyway.”

With a *hum* that seemed to rise from the depth of his belly, Dazai leaned against the handrail. His shoulders were humped under the angles of his trench coat, his gaze fixed on the city lights. "Yeah. I think I noticed that about five seconds after our first meeting."

“That was a long time ago.”

“It was,” Dazai murmured.

Silence hung between them for a moment, a gentle breeze combing through Chuuya’s messy ponytail. Yokohama’s skyline, illuminated by a tapestry of twinkling lights, stretched before them — and then, somewhere that felt far away and touchable at the same time, the Port Mafia towers dwarfed them.

Sometimes, Chuuya wondered if Mori had assigned him that specific penthouse to remind him that he had no place to hide; that he would always exist under the mafia’s eyes.

He was a son of the organization. He was born a soldier, and would die a slave.

“So,” he prompted, “I thought you were off to Lupin. Are you not waiting for something?”

“If Chuuya asks me nicely, maybe I can stay home like a good husband.”

It sounded like a promise — not for tonight, but *forever.* Chuuya knew better than to believe it. “Ah, but, see, I don’t want you to stay.” Despite himself, he grinned and flicked Dazai’s arm. “It’s fine if you leave. It’s none of my business where you wander to. But ya better remember that you can’t behave like a scoundrel and end up in a ditch, now that you have a kid waiting for you.”

As he turned to Chuuya and rubbed his nape, almost sheepishly, his smile softened. “Damn. Now I feel irresponsible.”

Chuuya chuckled, the embers of his cigarette glowing as he took a drag — and his voice was smoky, a sound born from his throat. "Oh, shut the fuck up. Go have that drink.”

I can manage on my own.

“You’re weird, Slug. Did you hit your head or something?”

“I just want you outta my sight.”

“I’ll be back before breakfast.”

“Yeah, I *really* don’t care. Have fun.” His hesitation suffocated Chuuya as the executive tried to guess the right answer. Was he supposed to ask his partner to stay? Was he supposed to *verbalize* that he really did not mind because he trusted Dazai would be back to haunt him?

“Are you sure?” Dazai asked, eventually.

Ah.

He forgot the main rule of the game. There was no right answer.

“As long as you come back,” Chuuya repeated, quieter. He could wait; they would *always* wait for one another. “You know as well as I do that no one can keep you in one place for long. Not even me.”

"Is Chuuya saying I’m incapable of committing?"

A smile played on Chuuya's lips as he exhaled a plume of smoke. Somber. *Yeah,* he thought, *would that be so far from the truth?* "I’m just saying you are such a stray cat — and that’s annoying as hell. You come and go as you please, but I guess you always find your way back when it’s convenient for you."

Dazai scanned his face, the moonlight casting a soft glow on his features. It rounded his edges. “I’m always Chuuya’s cat,” he whispered, voice spalling in the breeze. “I only happen to disappear from time to time.”

“Ha? You call *four years* ‘from time to time’?”

Dazai smirked — sadness flashing behind his mask for a second. “And I still came back to you after.”

“Yeah. And you ask to use Corruption, have me save you from a damn prison, and rope me into all your stupid schemes.”

“Well, what can I do? Chuuya’s my loyal dog~”

“So you say, but you’re the one who behaves like a cat. So what about ya drop the dog joke and finally admit that you're the pet here, asshole?”

“Then, I would argue that *I* am an exceptionally good one.”

Chuuya sighed, a mix of relief and resignation washing over him as he combed a hand through his hair. “A good pet, ha? That’s being generous. You are a *shit* pet.”

"At least I don’t yap all the time."

“Fuck you.”

“Chibi’s first.” He felt Dazai hesitate for a moment as if weighing his words carefully. He took a deep breath before speaking again. "You know, I didn't exactly choose to take on this whole guardianship role. The President forced me into it."

Chuuya's eyebrows rose, and he turned to face Dazai. It sounded absurd that anyone could have forced Dazai *walking-annoyance* Osamu into doing anything, with his ability to weasel his way out of situations unscathed. "I thought you guys were too hippie to force anyone into jobs? Aren't your friends always going on about consent and shit?"

"The President thought it'd be a good opportunity for me to grow more confident."

Chuuya hesitated. "You disagree with his decision," he said.

"Of course I do." Dazai's gaze shifted to the horizon, where the lights across the bay painted the sky blue and purple. Humanity was bustling under their feet. "I don't need more confidence. And when I pointed that out, with a list in alphabetical order of reasons why that was a terrible idea, the President clarified that it was *also* my responsibility to help the innocent, given my ability."

"No Longer Human?"

He shook his head. "The fact that I seem to be decent with children."

Ah. Right. "So you didn't want it?"

Dazai's shoulders slumped slightly. "I hardly understood why *you* would do it. But then... it doesn't happen often, but I was wrong; the President was right."

"The kiddo has a way of growing on you, doesn't she?"

Dazai chuckled softly. "She has."

"So you trust your President that much? That's touching." He shrugged. "Well, ya already know that I volunteered for this."

"Ah, yes, paladin Chuuya. A mafioso, yet always the better person in the room."

Chuuya snorted. "Frankly, fuck you. If I had known I'd be roped into doing this with *you,* I would have let Ane-San handle it."

"Yes, same~"

"I do hate working with your flat, mackerel ass."

Even more, he hated the fact that Mori expected him to ask Dazai to dig his way back into the organization. He would never do it. He didn't *know* how to do it.

"I hate Chuuya more."

"Alas, here we are."

"That seems to be our fate, doesn't it?" Even as he whined about that, Dazai scooted closer. He hovered at Chuuya's side, their shoulders nearly touching. He reached out and deftly

pinched the cigarette, slipping it from the executive's lips and stealing a long drag before exhaling a stream of smoke into the night. "How annoying."

Chuuya raised an eyebrow. "I thought you didn't like those cigarettes, hm? And now you're stealing them before barcrawling God-knows-where. You truly are the worst."

Dazai chuckled, a warm glint in his eyes. "I'm a man of taste."

"Your taste is a shitshow."

"That's ironic, coming from the king of tacky hats~"

Chuuya tched. He didn't move to rescue his cigarette, every fiber of his body already tensed and focused on Dazai.

A ripple shot down his spine as Dazai leaned close — close enough to bend against Chuuya's side, using the top of his head as a makeshift support surface for his face. Any other day, Chuuya would have shoved him away. Tonight, he could make an exception.

"You know," Dazai said, leaning his cheek against Chuuya's hair. "After all, I can think of worse fates than being stuck with you, partner."

—

Chuuya was driving Sonoko to a party organized by one of the kids at her school when the child first asked him about money.

Now, he was happy that the kiddo had made friends at school, and that she had been invited to this loathsome party organized by a classmate who went by the name of Haru-chan. She lived in the hills near Yamate-Cho, and the area was known for being expensive, but Chuuya told himself he would not grade Sonoko's playmates according to their parents' paychecks.

He had still run some background checks on the family for good measure, and they seemed clean. Loaded, much to Dazai's delight, but clean. And this Haru child made Sonoko smile and introduced her to all the nice things a young girl should know — like playing hide and seek and doing homework and having a friend, one true friend, that you feel will be for life even if it isn't— and Chuuya was happy with that.

Dazai had even tried to sweet-talk the mother out of the school's gates. He'd launched into his flamboyant act, and Chuuya wanted to gag. That was exactly the reason Chuuya was the designated driver accompanying Sonoko to the party and not his shithead of a partner.

"Chuuya-nii," Sonoko started, dutifully settling in the backseat of Chuuya's red sports car.

'A little flashy, don't you think?' Dazai had asked.

'It was Tross'. After you destroyed my other one, this is the only car I own,' Chuuya had replied.

"Yes, kiddo?"

“Are we rich?”

Chuuya hesitated. Now, the fact that she used ‘we’ warmed his heart. The fact that she was asking about his bank account, not so much. The thing was, kids never fired those kinds of questions out of the blue: either they were being bullied for the money, or some parents were snooping around.

“Why do you ask?”

“Haru-chan asked the teacher about it. She was thinking about it a lot.”

He flashed a glance in the rearview mirror. “Well, we are. Does that make you embarrassed with the other kids? Is this Haru-kid being a little *sh*— “He stopped himself right there, before his all-too-loose tongue could cause any more damage. “—Being nasty?”

“...She’s nice about it.”

“Good.”

“She’s just curious.”

Chuuya drummed gloved fingers on the steering wheel. “If anybody asks, you tell ‘em it’s none of their business.” He hesitated. “*Gently.* And you tell your teacher.”

“Okay,” she agreed. Her acceptance seemed placid enough, and she easily settled back into a distracted humming — *way* too easily.

“Good.”

“What is Chuuya-nii’s job?”

He pondered over a plausible answer again, balancing a lot of unlikely explanations on the tip of his tongue. “I work in an office,” he said, eventually, which was no different from rebutting with any vague bullshit of the caliber of ‘flowers are plants’— but screw it, honestly. “Dazai is a detective, though. He finds people and saves kittens that get stuck in trees.”

I make sure whoever left the damn kitten in a tree is punished thrice and kicked into the curb and shot dead, he thought. Then he stopped. That little tale had escalated way too fast to be child-friendly, didn’t it?

“I know. Dazai-nii saved Sushi-nii too, and he is a kitty.”

“Right. I suppose Jinko qualifies as a kind of cat.”

“Dazai-nii knows how to swim very well. He fished Sushi-nii from the river.”

Chuuya snorted a chuckle. It had been the other way around, but who was he to burst her childish bubble of innocence? Dazai *was* a decent swimmer anyway. He was a fish, after all. “Something like that, yeah.”

“I want to see the river.”

“We can take you for a picnic, kiddo. *If* you finish your homework on time.”

“Can we take Haru-chan too?”

“Yeah— we’ll see about that, alright?”

“Haru-chan also thinks Dazai-nii is a bit weird,” Sonoko added, forehead pressed against the window pane. When Chuuya looked again, she was drawing stars and waves on the condensation of the glass. “But she likes Chuuya-nii very much.”

Taking a tour to the left as he pulled into the gates of an expensive-looking maisonette, Chuuya grinned to himself. He supposed a day trip to the river with Sonoko’s friend *could* be organized, after all.

On second thought, he was starting to like this Haru-chan kid.

—

‘She is beautiful.’

‘Damn. She truly is beautiful.’

That was the first thought that crossed Chuuya’s mind, and he hated it.

She looks like someone who takes care of her appearance, his mind suggested, and that was enough for the spark to turn into combustion; jealousy bubbled under his skin for no reason at all apart from the fact that he was being over-sensitive.

Dazai stood in front of the girl — expression relaxed and hands in his trench coat as they chatted.

The sun cast a warm glow over the street bustling with people, yet a chill ran down Chuuya’s spine. It wasn’t cold. He had no reason to shiver.

The scene had caught his attention as he approached the Agency’s building to deliver some paperwork — he’d *offered* just to see Yosano, of course, and trade the latest gossip. Kenji too. He hated to admit it, but the kid was growing on him.

Part of him had also offered to stop by the Agency to check on Dazai, just in case; a display of good faith for their shared mission, to reassure Mori and himself that everything was running without unexpected bumps in the road.

How *silly* of him.

Dazai was doing more than fine.

The bastard had enough free time to flirt with women — beautiful women at that, Chuuya’s treacherous brain reminded him — during working hours. Stopping, Chuuya gnawed at his

bottom lip; the cold grew under his skin, causing goosebumps to bloom on his arms, sinking into his bones.

He didn’t want to look. He couldn’t peel his gaze away.

Dazai leaned in, his charismatic smile on full display as he effortlessly chipped away bits of her personal space. He leaned closer. And *closer*.

Chuuya couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at the sight.

Dazai's flirtatious nature was nothing new; no one could spend five minutes in the company of that jackass and say with their full chest that he was nothing but a flirty bastard. But then, as he swallowed dry, Chuuya wondered *why.*

Why was he glued in place, staring with his heart in his throat as Dazai moved a hand and curled a strand of the woman’s hair around his index finger? The bastard.

As he approached the duo, cutting into their conversation with uncharacteristic brusqueness, he had to remind himself that breaking the pavement by losing control of Tainted would have been bad. Boss didn’t like getting reports on Ability Users damaging the public spaces (understandable) and Dazai wouldn’t care anyway (asshole).

“So,” he said, stepping in. "Someone’s got time to waste, huh."

He almost felt the backlash when Dazai's attention shifted from the woman to him. That charming smile widened — not *naturally*, but as if someone had flipped a switch. It was a glitch, though, the smirk still wide a second later.

“Chuuya,” he greeted.

For a second, Chuuya hesitated. He could tell the dismissive tone from miles away, and it bit him and it annoyed him. “What’s going on here?”

“Just some networking, someone as boring as you wouldn’t understand~ You needed something?”

Chuuya's scowl deepened at the open dismissal. "Networking? *Now?* Ya should be at work."

The woman pressed against Dazai’s side, stepping away from the line of fire. Smart move, Chuuya supposed, as Dazai’s smile stretched. “Tanaka-san,” he introduced, gesturing at the woman. “Our latest client. I am her escort for tonight’s charity event. She’s from Fukuoka, so I was just suggesting to her some of the restaurants in the area.”

Ah, always so charming.
Chuuya's patience wore thin as he side-eyed the woman just to check her appearance. Maybe she wasn’t as beautiful as he first thought (*she was*).

And it was probably a terrible idea, but he couldn't help but snap back, “And I bet you’ll love to help her try them.”

With a smirk, Dazai relented and straightened up. "Why not?"

“And a few hotels too, huh?”

Dazai's grin remained intact, unshaken by Chuuya's accusation. "Come on, you worry too much~” he turned to Tanaka, offering her his hand. Palm up, like a prince in a fairy tale, and Chuuya hated it without a reason. “Now, it’s almost noon. How about we all go have a liquid lunch? Chuuya’s treat. He can pay for most things and still barely notice that money is missing from his wallet.”

Chuuya clenched his fists, his irritation bubbling to the surface. He could almost hear Dazai’s reasoning like a tiny, petulant voice in his brain: *After all, a minor distraction would hurt no one, right? Learn to loosen up, Slug.*

God. Even his brain was talking like Dazai now.

The tension between them hung heavy as the girl who had been chatting with Dazai earlier, sensing the escalating conflict, dangled awkwardly at Dazai’s side. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke, fidgeting with her bag. "Um, excuse me— Dazai-san wasn't being disrespectful."

Chuuya turned his sharp gaze toward her, his frustration still evident. However, after a moment, he sighed and ran a hand through his hair, his anger dissipating. "Look, this is none of my business, but–” He stopped. *God,* she really was beautiful. “-but, for your own sake, you should stay away from this guy."

She blinked.

“I… guess?”

“Chuuya,” Dazai warned him, a hard edge in his voice.

Without waiting for the other to respond with anything else, Chuuya abruptly turned and headed for the other direction, his footsteps echoing in his ears as he continued on his path to the Agency.

You are my dog for life, Dazai said.

And Chuuya took those words and made them his like an imbecile, latching onto it like some kind of reassurance. *Damn it.* He was an idiot, and Dazai was confusing him. He had no way out.

—

“Ah. It seems like I’ve gone overboard.”

The smile froze on Dazai’s lips, eyes following the other man as he disappeared behind a curtain of people rushing to work, his black coat floating behind him. He felt like he’d just opened his fingers, letting go of something he should have held on to.

“Who was that?”

“An old friend,” he replied.

The girl’s question reminded him of where he was.

His task for the day was to monitor Tanaka Sayaka on behalf of the Agency. Keep her occupied while Tanizaki and Kunikida went through the details of her firm, seeing if anyone was cooking the books and covering ties with the Guild. But his mission was *also* Chuuya. The difference was that he took no pleasure in fulfilling the first job and was terrified of messing up the latter.

Slowly, Tanaka touched his arm to claim his attention. Her hands were gentle, they smelled like mint cream. “Maybe it’s not my place,” she said. “But don’t you think that it would be best to clear the air with him, maybe?”

I want to follow him, yes, his brain agreed. He couldn’t, though. It was best not to. “That won’t be necessary.”

“I’ll wait here,” she assured. As if that changed anything. As if that soothed the *storm* in Dazai’s chest.

“He’ll need some time to cool off.”

“But he seems to have misunderstood our situation.”

Dazai’s eyes narrowed. Of course, Chuuya had jumped to conclusions, and Dazai blamed himself for building their emotional bond on quicksand and lies. He fed Chuuya reasons to doubt him, he grew this monster on a steady diet of bullshit and jokes. And suddenly Dazai was the boy who cried wolf, and he cried and cried and *cried* until he scared away the sheep — even the bravest one of them all. “I’m sure he did, yes. He expects me to go on dates behind his back, probably.”

“So…”

“Trust me, Tanaka-san, it’s much better if I give him time to clear his head,” he interrupted, and he smiled at her — wistful, far away, but with a firmness that left no space for her protests. “I know my partner.”

Tanaka looked back with big, doe-like eyes. Guilt washed all over her face for being a cog in Dazai’s scheme, but he shrugged off the feeling. He did not owe her reassurance. He knew Chuuya.

He knew that their partnership was complicated above all things and that any conversation between them would end in a verbal fight and probably a few gunshots fired (on which side, that remained to be seen). Sometimes, it was best to give Chuuya the space he needed to cool off.

With a sigh, Dazai settled back into a relaxed position and crossed his ankles as his shoulders slouched a little, the remnants of the argument lingering in the air.

It was okay for now, he told himself. He'd focus on the mission first, and save the mending of his relationship with Chuuya for later.

He knew where to find Chuuya, after all.

They always knew where to find each other. It was their blessing and their curse, always forced into one another's space.

Whenever he was pissed at him (which happened regularly), Chuuya liked to sulk in a smoke-filled shitshow of an underground bar. *Aoi no Ride,* screamed the neon board outside. It was missing a letter, broken and never replaced. Blue Ride. It sounded like a meth trip.

Affluent criminals and ladder-climbing politicians gathered around the round tables, spreading their illicit trades all over the velvet sofas. Red, of course. Stained beyond repair. Leather jackets and broken glasses and rock tunes mixed in with the sweet scent of alcohol and the pungent reek of sweat. 'A safe place for those who indulged in the subterranean side of Yokohama,' people said.
The truth was that Aoi no Ride was a shithole. The richer the clientele was, the less classy the bar. Dazai had learned that lesson during his time in the mafia and, apparently, not much had changed since that time.

And in that darkness, he knew he would find red hair, a hat, and a black coat.

—

Chuuya's grip on his wine glass tightened as he dangled forward into Tachihara's space.

They were perched on tall leather stools, sitting at the counter — 'best seats in the house', or so he was told when he was *way* too young to drink and yet he was served spirits without anyone batting an eye. The executive craved to break the thin shell of his own skin, peel his knuckles in a fight, but he knew better than to cause trouble. He would not claim Dazai's attention by acting like a dog. He would *not.*

Fuck Dazai, frankly.

Fuck the stupid Agency, too.

Hence he ended up drinking with the former Black Lizard, *former* Hunting Dog, thrice-traitor.

Chuuya's throat hurt from the venting, and his headache pulsated in his temples as if his brain was trying to leak from his eye sockets. It had been a terrible day. He was in a shit mood.

And it was all because of an asshole.

"Now, ya listen to me," Chuuya raged on, his words honed as the wine loosened his tongue, gesturing between himself and Tachihara. He was cutting himself on every edge of the memories he shared with Dazai, barbed words gashing the inside of his mouth. "I can't stand that *damn* asshole, yeah?"

Tachihara sipped his beer. It was the fourth, and he still was nowhere near tipsy. *Unfair.*

“I know, Chuuya-san.”

“Why does Boss want that troublemaker back? We would have to put him in a cage every time Higuchi is around, I’m telling you.” He sank his teeth into his bottom lip. He tasted blood. “And that motherfucking flippant attitude? The recklessness? Fucking hell.” Nails sinking in the counter. Someone laughed behind them, Chuuya’s nerves so tense that he almost snapped at it. “And that *shitty* grin he always wears like something funny is going on all the time—nothing is *fucking* funny, ha. That sorry bag of bandages is incapable of taking anything seriously. *Why* does Boss want him back?”

Knowing his place, Tachihara nodded and drank as requested. He’d learned to not insult Dazai and just listen, and Chuuya prided himself on teaching the man that simple yet necessary rule: no one, *ever,* insulted Dazai Osamu in front of Chuuya. Except for Chuuya himself, of course.

His audience was more than welcome to nod along while he profusely complained, though.

Part of him recognized that it felt like a scripted conversation — something they had been over a thousand times. Opening the night in a bar and ending it in a hotel, in blissful darkness and ragged moans. They’d exit the room reeking of sex. Sometimes, Tachihara limped away; sometimes, Chuuya sported the bites of a knife under his clothes.

It always ended like that, one way or the other, and Chuuya always ascribed his terrible decision-making to his former partner’s influence. Dazai ruined him. Dazai had taken his brain and hacked it beyond salvation.

Too bad the executive also did not care enough to change the routine.

“I hear your concerns,” Tachihara said, lifting the Yebisu can. “The Ol’ man shares some of them.”

Chuuya blinked. *That* was new. “Hirotsu? Really?”

“Yeah. He said someone like Dazai might be unsuited to serve under the Boss — and he’s not trustworthy.”

“Interesting opinion.” Chuuya’s eyes narrowed. “And are *you* trustworthy*,* former Hunting Dog Tachihara Michizou?”

He saw Tachihara shiver under the accusation, his complexion turning so pale and then so pink that the band-aid on his nose appeared a shade of jaundiced yellow. “I chose to work as a double agent. Boss knew the difference then, as he knows now that someone like Dazai would have to be *forced* into the organization.”

Mulling over the words, Chuuya bit his bottom lip. Tachihara was not wrong. It was a hard point to ignore when the man’s voice had the serene steadiness of someone who lost everything and had nothing left to hide. Tachihara was young and alone.

Dazai wasn't like that.
Dazai had his friends and his burdens and his loyalty to the Agency. The bastard was many things, a hypocrite above all, but his loyalty — once attained — never wavered.

(I am loyal to you.)

“I see,” Chuuya murmured. He drank some more. “Ya say Dazai would never choose to come back.”

“No, he won’t. The Agency’s dynamics, how they work— I was in the war, Chuuya-san. I saw it. The Agency defended their organization like rabid dogs; they have no intention to forsake it, none of them.”

“Boss has his ways.”

Tachihara’s shoulders slumped. “That might buy Dazai’s services for a certain amount of time. I heard someone might be transferred from the Armed Detective Agency, and that might bring Dazai back temporarily. But his loyalty will stay with the Agency.”

“He reminds you of someone,” Chuuya murmured. It was a gut feeling, but Tachihara nodded.

“Teruko-chan,” he whispered back. His grip steadied around the beer while he looked down, as if he could peek at the darkest bottom of the can. “That kind of loyalty that the Agency has– I’ve *seen* it. If the Boss is asking you to bring Dazai back, he must know it’s not an easy job.”

“You’re saying Boss is setting me up for failure?”

Tachihara shook his head. Something Chuuya liked about him was that the man could be boisterous and raw, but also calm and smarter than average. For so long, many people in the organization had underestimated Tachihara Michizou of the Black Lizard.

Most of them were dead now.

“I’m saying it’s a difficult task.”

“Do you think it’s meritless?”

“I think it’s risky,” Tachihara compromised, head hunching forward.

It’s burning me alive, Chuuya wanted to admit. He didn’t. “Who even wants Dazai back? He’s a troublemaker.”

“Indeed. And are you not going to anger-dial him today, Chuuya-san?” Tachihara asked — and a playful grin was playing on his face. It made his jawbone look less square, it assuaged the vitriol in his hazel eyes. They looked green under a certain light, as green as his jacket. Wounded Eyes. Orphan Eyes. Hunting Dog eyes.

And here he went again, Nakahara Chuuya, lusting over a *traitor.* A young traitor, too. Damn it, Tachihara must have considered him an old geezer who got sloppy drunk, moaned about his ex-partner, and fell into bed with subordinates to feel less sorry for himself.

Not the best look, huh.

Was he playing with Tachihara's heart? They were having fun. They fucked. That was all.

"Not gonna call Dazai?" Tachihara insisted. Gentler. *Don't call him,* it almost said, though surely Chuuya was imagining it.

"No," Chuuya growled. "Not today."

Not after he messed me up and said a lot of things I do not understand.

Not after we felt like something true, something rare — like the first snow falling over a garden, painting it in muted colors. We silence the world. He silences my *world, and all I can hear is his voice calling my name. He's here. He calls me.*

And all I can hear is—

"Chuuya-san?" Tachihara scooted closer and squeezed his shoulder, a frown painted on his face. "Everything okay? Did I say the wrong thing?"

"No. *Yeah.* I guess I'm fine."

"You don't look okay."

"I'm just pissed. He makes it sound like we're something, and we're—" *And we are an enormous pile of nothing.* And the joke was all on Chuuya because he was the one birthing misplaced expectations. He was the one who thought that a mission and a child could show him things about Dazai that he never considered before. With his full strength, enough to attract the attention of the bartender, he slammed the empty glass on the counter. "Nevermind. Screw Dazai. There's a love hotel nearby, wan—"

"You know, Chuuya, you shouldn't let a little argument drive you to the bottle. It's not healthy."

The voice that interrupted their conversation slithered into the heated atmosphere like a shadow. Chuuya turned abruptly. He felt the burning of amber eyes burrowing in his skin, first; then the cutting of a sharp, cold smile.

Dazai was leaning against the bar on the other side of Tachihara, a hooded smirk dancing on his lips — but the smile died behind his irises like a candle swallowed by the darkness.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Dazai chuckled as if the anger in Chuuya's voice was nothing more than a cute dog yapping. "I came to check on my partner."

“Fuck off.”

The smile didn’t budge. Most people cowered when threatened by him. Dazai didn’t. “No,” he said. Simple. Factual.

“Go away. I’m having a good drink and you’re ruining it.”

“And then *what?”* Dazai leaned forward, a half-lidded smirk that was suave only on the surface. *And then what will you do, partner?* Chuuya felt the question on his skin, then it trickled into his flesh. “I came to take you home.”

Tachihara scooted away, silent as a ghost, and Chuuya could not blame him. He would not have wanted to get caught in this mess, either. His eyes narrowed.

"Ha? You go home, shithead. I’m gonna stay right here – me *and* my fuckin’ bottle."

“Very well,” Dazai purred, an edge in his drawl that cut Chuuya’s skin; another invisible nick to his heart. “What drove you to the bottle tonight? What minor inconvenience is so *huge* that you can’t deal with it?”

As his entire body gleamed red, gravity flickering out of control, Chuuya swore the accusation didn’t sting.

“Fuck you,” he snapped.

Dazai hummed. “I asked you a question.”

“It’s your fault.”

“Are you *disappointed* that I talk to women?”

Chuuya shivered. Anger crackled in him like a live wire — and the executive recognized the emotion and *basked* in it, but didn’t know what to do about it. “Right,” he hissed. “You’re right, I forgot to ask. Where did you leave your friend?”

“Work,” Dazai said. The word was put aside quickly as it sloped out of Chuuya’s brain; he refused to believe it. “She was an Agency’s job.”

“As if I care.”

“Watch your tone, then, because you sound like you care enough.”

“Hey.” Tachihara attempted to intervene, lifting both hands. “Let’s not cause a scene. I can escort Chuuya-san home after this drink. It’s no trouble.”

“Did I ask *you*, Tachihara?”

Chuuya momentarily recoiled under the hard edge of Dazai’s answer. Despite the truce, despite the politics, he didn’t even try to sound friendly.

“Oi,” Chuuya hissed. “You don’t get to speak like that to people. I’m the one you have a problem with.” A glare. *We’re always the problem, aren’t we?* “So take it out on me, asshole.”

Dazai wetted his lips, side-glancing at Tachihara. But it was too late anyway — the sudden assertiveness had already silenced the mafioso, a demon versus a mere bloodhound. The outcome of the fight seemed obvious enough. The glance Dazai flashed to Tachihara carried an unspoken message; ‘Stay away from him, or else.’

And no one ever wanted to discover what the *‘else’* would entail, with Double Black.

Tch-ing, Chuuya clasped his glass in annoyance. He was *used* to people fighting like dogs for his attention, but Dazai never got himself involved in any of those quarrels. While other people bent over backward for a word from Chuuya, lighting his cigarettes and bowing to him, Dazai never wrestled other people in the mud for him.

Dazai always took everything as if Chuuya’s loyalty was his birthright — and in return, the executive had to admit, he offered him just the same. Unwavering loyalty.

‘I hate you, but I will drop everything to save you.’

That was why Chuuya knew better than to try to argue inside a bar right now. He left his card on the counter to settle the bill for Tachihara. He ordered the subordinate to get himself another round or two, as an apology, and didn’t protest when Dazai grasped his wrist and said, “Let’s go.”

With Tachihara reluctantly stepping aside, Chuuya allowed Dazai to lead him away from the bustling crowd of the bar.

Much to Chuuya’s surprise, Dazai halted after not more than a step.

“Ah, Tachihara,” the man called, shooting a smile of pure malice behind his shoulder. “A word of advice. Don’t aim above your league.”

—

Chuuya had agreed *willingly* to fall into step alongside his rival.

A heavy silence enveloped them, laden with the weight of unspoken accusations. All the unsaid festering under the surface caused a scream to sprout in Chuuya’s throat. Every time, he stifled it.

He decided to follow Dazai: not out of weakness, but to finally accept a confrontation long overdue.

Anger swirled within Chuuya's thoughts as he allowed Dazai to lead him out of the bar and into the breezy embrace of the night. He sucked in a greedy mouthful of air after such a long time spent in a place that low-key smelled like sweat and spilled beer. His steps were guided by Dazai’s firm grip around his wrist.

He felt caught in the current of a river, tripping over his feet as he struggled to keep up with Dazai's pace. The bastard sure had long legs. In *no* lifetime was Chuuya going to humiliate himself and ask the Fish to slow down.

The crowd of the bar had faded behind them, replaced by the hushed humming of the city's nocturnal rhythm. Yokohama was *breathing* around them. Neon signs shone fragmented shadows over the grey-stoned streets and concrete buildings. Automatic doors and loud jingles chimed at their passage.

Dazai suddenly halted in the middle of the sidewalk, his grip on Chuuya's wrist firm yet strangely gentle. It lasted for a moment more and, when he let go, the executive's stomach dropped. He felt like he needed to start fighting first, or he'd find himself trapped in that sticky tension.

"What the hell was that!?"

Dazai stood tall and *tense* — Chuuya saw how his veins throbbed with anger in his neck, bulging under his bandages. Yet, he met Chuuya's eyes and didn't try to run away. "We need to talk."

"What the fuck is your problem?"

"My problem?" Dazai replied; his voice was a rumbling, faraway thunderstorm. "You see me with someone — a *client,* at that — and go rogue. That is my problem."

"So you're angry about Tachihara?"

"I'm angry about the *implications,* Chuuya. What do you think of me?" Chuuya hesitated. That was a repulsively good question, and Dazai had lost no time before going straight for the jugular. Classic Dazai. Straight for the kill. With a deep sigh, the man flicked his dark fringe away from his eyes. "I *understand* that this kind of arrangement is not what you wanted when you took on the mission — that it's getting to us. We knew it could happen. I *get* it, but we can't keep on like this. We'll end up hurting each other."

"As if spiting me isn't your damn full-time job."

Dazai snorted. His features softened. "You're drunk."

"Praise the Lord," Chuuya hummed, lifting his arms and then letting them fall along his sides. "I would have already punched you if I weren't."

But he was just tipsy, and they both knew it — Chuuya had a way of blacking out completely after having too many drinks, passing out on the counter and being carried home, so this wasn't it. He was just pissed as hell.

"And so do you *really* think someone like Tachihara would be worth your time?"

"Yes," he murmured, slowly nodding his head. He glanced down at the grey pavement, heartbeat suddenly in his throat. "Yes, he is. He's good for me. Mad good in bed, too — wouldn't be the first time. What is that to you?"

The admission of a sexual affair seemed to maul at Dazai, opening a wound in the depth of his amber eyes. They bled gold.

Which made no sense at all, right?

Dazai liked women. Dazai sure as hell didn't like *him.* And Dazai left first, so it was only natural that Chuuya had found himself other friends in these four years. Sexual partners, too. Entitled as that imbecile might have been, he must have known Chuuya had other flings and people he had slept with. Certainly, Dazai didn't spend his life thinking about Chuuya's sexual life — God, Chuuya *really* hoped that was not the case — but he must have been at the very least aware of its existence.

So the problem lay elsewhere, as the churning of his guts suggested: another, better concealed, issue that hurt Dazai so — and so *openly*, too. It was an unfamiliar sight, to spot undiluted agony on his partner's face. Longing, even.

And it hit Chuuya, then, that they didn't exist in a remote bubble anymore. They weren't teenagers anymore. It wasn't just Double Black and their devastating fights and their brutal rivalry. He'd forgotten about the mission the second he saw Dazai flirt with someone, losing his composure like one loses his balance: all of a sudden, grasping at anything to stay afloat, and without an exact plan of action. Gracelessly.

He followed the hunch that he'd be better off taking Tachihara to a love hotel to avoid home — and avoiding Dazai in the process. Doing that, he'd *also* forgotten that he'd left Sonoko alone with his partner.

"Shit," he snarled, fists clenching. He forgot about Sonoko — about a literal order from the Boss. Great. *So* great. "Ya want me to write a report? Ya want an apology? Because you're right."

Dazai's brows furrowed. "Apologize?"

"For leaving you alone with Sonoko."

"W—" Genuine surprise flickered across Dazai's face. That was new. "Are you worried about work, slug?"

Chuuya's eyebrows shot up. "Isn't that the issue?"

"No," Dazai said, pinching the bridge of his nose. He sounded mildly defeated, like he'd tried to ask a dog to solve a 1000-piece puzzle. Chuuya didn't know shit about puzzles, but he sure didn't like being talked to like a *dog*. "No. She's with Kunikida, whom I can *actually* trust not to act like a disobedient dog."

"Oh, *splendid.* Right. So do you want me to grovel at your feet? Are you here to tell me your new partner has a better temperament, a decent one, and he backed you up?" Dazai opened his mouth, but Chuuya stopped him, "Because you're right. Congratulations. Dazai *fucking* Osamu is right again, shocker. I care about this mission, and maybe that's my problem."

And you're pressuring me too much, too much, too much—

"Your only problem is that you never listen."

"You said from the start I was going to fuck up. And you're *always* right, ha?"

I'm not good enough on my own. It was always Nakahara Chuuya, half of Double Black. Nakahara Chuuya, *former* half of Double Black.

The umbilical cord that shackled him to this partnership was strangling him.

"Stop going on about a *job,"* Dazai hissed. It made Chuuya flinch, the tension oozing from his partner that had finally built up in a thunderous growl. He had never heard this kind of tone before, not from *Dazai.* "Chuuya." His own name sounded like a wound, raw and gangrenous. "Listen."

"Yeah," he said. He might as well brace himself.

"The problem isn't this mission. It's us."

Chuuya laughed at that; curt and joyless. He laughed because he could not afford to show that it hurt, even if it did. God, it *did*. "Right. Fuck you." A breath. "There's no us. Never been one, if we're honest, so quit talking like we are okay to play house, braid each other's *goddamn* hair, and talk about our feelings."

"You don't think that when you risk your life to save mine," Dazai said. It sounded soft, and it somehow fueled Chuuya's anger. He had no right. He remembered waiting around for hours in an empty apartment; the day he received the call and Ane-san said, 'I'm sorry, lad. It's Dazai.' The feeling of losing yet another friend.

"Low blow, Dazai," he hissed.

"But I'm right, am I not? And you didn't think that when you came to me in France."

"Of course I didn't, shithead. You were gonna die."

"And you saved me."

"It means nothing."

Dazai's lips turned into a thin line. "It means something to me."

"Fuckin hell— You *left,* Dazai! You helped yourself to the goddamn door four years ago, and I want you to stay there. How dare you say stuff like this when all you do is mess up my existence and demand me to be bloody delighted about it! And then you call me back to break you out of prison, and I—" *And you ask me to use Corruption, and you ask me to shoot you in the head. You entrust me with your heart and then take it away again. "*Why do you even bother sticking around? Do you even give a flying fuck, you selfish bast—"

"I am in love with you, for *fuck's* sake."

Oh.

Oh.

Chuuya didn't expect it to happen like that. Before he could react or even comprehend what was happening, Dazai took a step closer, his fingers sliding onto Chuuya's shoulders.

Then, in a moment that felt surreal, Dazai bent over him.
He wrapped strong arms around Chuuya's waist — long, cold fingers that the executive knew so well settled on the small of his back — and kissed him.

Chuuya stood, stunned.
The world seemed to hold still as their lips met, igniting a violent spark that sent a shiver down the executive's spine.

It wasn't possible.

Not Dazai, not this.

Suddenly he wasn't angry anymore.
He wasn't scared, either.
He was nothing at all, his heart pounding loudly in his chest as Dazai's familiar scent surrounded him; whisky, ink, green tea. *Home.*
The rush of his blood in his eardrums drowned out the distant sounds of the city.

Dazai's mouth pressed against his, both demanding and tentative; a plea, a paradox as he nibbled at the executive's bottom lip. In response, guided by nothing but instinct, Chuuya's eyelashes fluttered close. He surrendered, and it felt long overdue.
He kissed back.
Wasn't that the stupidest decision ever? He kissed *back.*
He thawed in it, dazed, because Dazai's mouth felt soft against his own as he angled his head to taste him.

To *feel* him.

He held him close and Chuuya's breath faltered, lost in yet another kiss that he didn't know how to interpret. His hands fisted the lapels of Dazai's coat, itching to sink in dark curls.

Then the man's hand covered his cheek, thumb skimming over Chuuya's cheekbone, and his heart stuttered; it was painful, and it was *absolute.*

It was—

"Wait."

—It was too much, too fast.

When the executive let go and pushed both his palms against Dazai's shoulders to pull away, breathless and wide-eyed, he saw that the man's irises were clouded. Unreadable.

“What the hell—” Chuuya started, voice throaty, brushing his bottom lip as if to lock the kiss there. As if to understand what to make of the terrifying door that suddenly opened in front of him.

“You have my answer,” Dazai said, eyes narrowing. And Chuuya hated it — he hated being shut out of his partner’s mind. “I will wait for yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the amazing support so far! I appreciate you all so much❤️
Let me know what you think, I absolutely love to hear your comments — how do you think Chuuya will answer? 👀

Never to Return

Chapter Summary

"What if we adopt her?"

A date, a request and a confession.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai stopped to buy a vase of One Cup Sake from an all-night Family Mart.

The drink tasted foul, transparent like plain white spirit, the kind of alcohol an artist would use to clean their brushes. He wondered if it would clean his heart, bleaching it back into a primordial, bright virginity. He hoped it would clean him into nothingness – melting away all his colors from the inside, leaving him brand-new. An abstinent state of purity. Transparent alcohol, not murky blood.

He opened the cup, twisting the cap with a curt movement of his wrist until it opened with a *pop,* then downed half of it in one greedy sip while walking. It reminded him of the times that he'd pretended he couldn't open bottles or cups just to annoy Kunikida.
He licked his lips, the alcohol burning the roof of his mouth. It tasted foul, like nail polish.

If Dazai closed his eyes, he could almost *believe* it was nail polish. That it'd kill him.

He drank the rest of it on the train. Not enough. It tasted like punishment but didn't do shit for his mind. By the time he crawled up to the rooftop of the Port Mafia's building, he was still painfully sober.

The Port Mafia rooftop always felt like home. Wind-swept, unmerciful, with the same bleak emptiness of an abandoned shipping container. Dazai harbored no affection for the mafia towers, but he did miss its high rooftop.

Night had fallen over Yokohama, casting a silvery glow across the city, as he considered the distance between himself and the ledge, his tan trench coat billowing in the breeze.
He took in the city under his feet and he longed to fall and fall and *fall.*

Somewhere in that sea of lights, there was the Agency. Kunikida with his ideals, Atsushi with a life to turn around, Yosano with demons to overcome and lives to save.

They all had dreams and hopes Dazai had no business interfering with. The government had its plans for the city. Not for the first time, Dazai wondered – as he confronted the void with his hands in his pockets – if any of them were going to die because of those schemes.

Sonoko was fast asleep in Chuuya's penthouse, perfectly oblivious to the storm that had engulfed her guardians. '*A storm is coming,'* just as Verlaine liked to presage from his basement, voice ruined and gaze searching for a ghost.

And then, at last, there was—

"Don't you dare, jackass."

Chuuya's voice reached him from the other end of the rooftop.

As he refused to turn, Dazai's lips stretched into a sheepish smile.

"Whatever do you mean, I wonder~"

"Don't you dare jump." Chuuya's eyes narrowed, an unspoken threat clouding his irises. "If you jump, I'll kill you."

His gritty voice sounded edged.
Oh, Dazai *knew* his partner was going to put him through the cheese grater. He'd drag his ass, and Dazai would have deserved it.

But what a vision he was: Nakahara Chuuya, now that Dazai had learned the taste of his lips. His anger burned like whisky down his throat, but his mouth felt sweet on Dazai's lips. It made the man smile — a somber curling of lips, taking his time to face the other man.

"Why, Chuuya, your lack of faith wounds me."

"I'm serious, dumbass."

Dazai's shoulders turned stiff. "I'm not jumping," he stated, flat-toned. *Not that it's not tempting but, alas, things still need to be seen through.* "I told you I'd wait for your answer."

"Yeah, no shit. I thought you'd be home with the kid*,* not out here on a goddamn rooftop."

Dazai tutted. *"Home."*

"Ya heard me."

Right, *that's* where he should have been — in theory, that was. Instead, Dazai was measuring how long the fall would take from here, and if it'd kill him gently. Wondering how it'd feel to have his brain smashed into the concrete, splattered all over the street, skull fracturing like an eggshell against the pavement. He imagined the liquid noises and the cracks and the blinding white, a flash before a never-ending darkness. There'd be plenty of blood and shattered bones, a vision people would never forget. Dying from such a height would not hurt.
He would just disconnect upon impact, a switch being turned off. Sweet, *merciful* fall.

"I needed to think, and I can't do that in Chuuya's ugly apartment," he said. He paused.
"And, for your information, I am never going to jump in front of you — I'm not that *flashy."*

"Stupid of ya to think I'd let you fall alone."

Dazai's heart stuttered. "You'd come after me?"

"No shit."

"Why?" He arched an eyebrow. "You're the one who said no one would believe I'm human, after all."

A flinch crossed Chuuya's body. His cheeks turned pale as he sucked in a breath — and insecurity made his eyes look all kinds of blue, and he was so beautiful Dazai could weep. "I don't think that shit," he said, and his voice stammered as he glanced at the chasm behind Dazai. "I never thought that. I was young and an asshole, I— it's no excuse, but it was a long time ago."

"Was it?"

"I don't think you're a monster, Osamu."

"Ah, right. Nakahara Chuuya who can do no wrong, who always lets all those feelings he keeps inside choke him to death." He snorted. "And you call *me* suicidal."

"I just don't understand why you would kiss me," Chuuya admitted, a little shy of a whisper. "Why *me."*

The unspoken question bordered on fear, on *hope.* Dazai suspected it was the kind of uncertainty that forced a man into immobility — the kind that caused children to tether at the edge of a pool before they learned how to swim.

Instead, Dazai had thrown himself in the proverbial pool hoping the water would drown him. Head-first. Stupidly.

He was drowning, and it might have been for nothing, but Chuuya was holding his heart in his hands and there was nothing else Dazai could have done but *jump.* Either he learned or he died.

Dazai shrugged. "It was something I have wanted to do for a while now."

Chuuya raised an eyebrow. "I get that," he breathed out. "What I am asking you is *why?"*

"I'm in love with you." He said so flatly, matter-of-fact. He tried to not cut himself on the edges of his own voice. "And I missed you, all these years. Is that so impossible to believe?"

"You left first."

"No," Dazai countered, and his chuckle rang colorless in the emptiness of the rooftop. A pellucid and bitter tone, just like that cheap saké; like his masks. "No, you're not getting it — we were never honest with each other. Even when we were working together, I would have never taken this kind of risk. You didn't want to know me, back then."

Confusion flashed across Chuuya's face. "Are you stupid? We got paired up all the time and you kept complaining about it. Of course I hated dealing with ya."

And Dazai made sure of it, day in and day out.

Because they were never together in that earnest, tender way that Dazai's soul yearned for. Their hearts touched one another at times, yes, bumping into each other with a shy confusion, always by chance and never by *choice;* just occasional ships crossing paths in the vast, vast sea. Their souls occasionally collided, but their hands never did. There's a special kind of torture in knowing you are loved, but not in the way you crave. Knowing you'll never be enough.

Taking a deep breath, Dazai sauntered forward. The nightly wind swept through his hair, and he combed through his curls with stiff fingers.

"I'm not going to lie, here," he continued, moving another step toward Chuuya, "I was always going to manipulate you into understanding my feelings, at some point; that was the plan. You didn't even have to do anything, just read a letter or something." A pause. "Preferably, after I was gone."

Chuuya glared like he could have murdered him himself. "Tell me you're joking."

"Bets imply a certain amount of upfront risk, and you were never a risk I was willing to take."

"Christ." His voice shook as he pinched his nose. Dazai knew that act, the mechanical gesture of when he wanted to punch a wall– or four. "You were *seriously* never going to tell me."

He gave half a shrug. "My delusions were never yours to take on."

"It wasn't—?" A pause. For a second, Chuuya looked like he was finally about to cave and hit him — fire in his eyes, fists clenched and ready to hit. His shoulders shook, and Dazai prepared to side-step an attack. But then he exhaled, and his chest emptied and Dazai's brain stopped screaming at him to duck and run for his life. "Ya know what, I am not fucking arguing with you on that *now.* But delusions or not, it's been seven bloody years, shithead. We've known each other for seven. *Fucking.* Years."

He shrugged the accusation away, offering nothing but a tiny smile in exchange for his partner's rage. Chuuya was staring at him with something shattered in his irises, something ruined, as if Dazai had stolen years from them. As if his silence had shattered all the things they could have been.

(Could they be anything at all?)

But the truth was that Dazai never thought much of that omission — just another layer of his armor. Just another piece of him covered in bubble wrap.

"And I couldn't say it to your face, not when I didn't know. Once you had figured out that I was in love with you, you could have done whatever you pleased with that information. You would have been free to be disgusted. You could have hated me, even. But I would have been too dead to c—"

“Dazai,” Chuuya interrupted him, his stance stiffening but his voice *gentler.* His eyes burrowed under Dazai’s flesh like fragments of cold fire as he stepped closer. The pain in his own name – a *plea* – caused him to shut up, jaw set. “If you say ‘dead’ one more time, I’m going to punch you for real. I always thought you hated me.”

“I tried,” Dazai murmured, bending to touch his forehead to Chuuya’s own. How *stupid* it sounded now, seeing love so clearly in blue, *blue* eyes. “Believe me, I tried that.”

“And…?”

“It never worked,” he whispered. *God, he’d been defeated from day one.*

Chuuya's hand reached out, and he gently cupped Dazai's cheek, his thumb brushing away the coldness and dust from the man’s face.

“For the record,” he whispered, and Dazai’s breath caught, “you don’t need to wait for my answer. You always had it.”

"Have I?”

“Hm-m. It was yours.”

Dazai cracked a sheepish smile. “Well, it seems I’ve never been worth much as a detective."

Not if I’m up against you. Not if it’s us.

Chuuya snorted, not unkindly. “Lies,” he said.

“In my defense, I said when we were kids that I wanted to kiss you. I was deadly serious.”

Chuuya flashed him a smirk, and it seemed clear that he remembered an old night in the countryside as intensely as Dazai did. Dazai’s heart hiccuped. *God, he remembered.* “Then do it,” blue eyes gleamed in the night. “Coward.”

Once again, Chuuya didn’t wait for him to reply at all.

He leaned forward, grabbing his bolo tie to pull him in. Dazai allowed himself to smile, half surprised and entirely *in awe.* Then Chuuya murmured something that sounded like ‘ *I can’t believe it’*, and then kissed him more — a proper kiss now, mouth chasing his partner’s lips and hands slipping into dark curls. The weight of the world shifted off Dazai’s shoulders as he bent under the gentle pressure of Chuuya’s searing lips. It was the kind of kiss he had been dreaming about in countless strangers’ beds, tangled in cold dead sheets, praying to the wrong gods.

Chuuya kissed him deeply, and he kissed him long, and Dazai forgot everything he knew under the spell of those lips.

It brought him back to another time.

We made it out, he thought. *We survived. We’re okay.*

I love you, drummed Dazai's rib cage, a chanting thought filling him as his pulse ran wild. *I love you. I love you.*

—

In the heart of Yokohama's bustling amusement park, the roller coasters loomed tall. Their steel frames reaching for the sky. It was a bright day, with a clear blue sky that stretched out above them.

He and Chuuya stood at the entrance of Cosmo World, the executive carrying a black backpack that Dazai had refused to touch. *He* was going to be the designated passenger princess of the day, *thank you very much.* By his side, clinging to his hand with gloved fingers, Sonoko's eyes sparkled with excitement as she clutched her own little pink backpack, ready for the adventure of a lifetime.

During the summer break, Ango had suggested they could help Sonoko feel a little more at home with some day trips.

After a successful day at the aquarium (Dazai had fallen in the penguin tank and Chuuya had *somehow* bribed the establishment not to throw them out) and to the Cup Noodles museum (Kenji and Atsushi had tagged along), Chuuya proposed they go to Cosmo World next.

'All the other parents say it's fun,' the executive explained – which prompted Dazai to scoff, somewhat amused. His ex-partner *surely* had plenty of opinions on childcare for a childless Mafia executive. Still, he also had heard similar things, and he didn't need *Ranpo* to tell him that an amusement park would likely be appreciated by a child, so he had slipped into his trench coat and followed the overexcited child (Chuuya) and said Chibi's mini-me into the amusement park.

"Are you ready, princess?" Dazai asked, beaming down at Sonoko.

He could fake excitement for a child's sake; he had a *Ph.D.* in faking emotions.

The nod she gave him back was vigorous, her short pigtails bouncing with enthusiasm. Dazai had to give it to Verlaine: his stupid passion for gifting the child hair accessories *helped,* occasionally, and saved everybody a lot of money. Sanrio hair clips turned out to be surprisingly expensive.

"Yes! Leggo."

Chuuya chuckled, ruffling her hair. "Alright. Let's start with something eas—"

"Rollecoaste's!" she cried, interrupting him as she swung her arms open and turned to face the executive.

With a click of his tongue, Chuuya squatted down to her level. "Now, kiddo," he said, in what Dazai assumed was going to be a convincing tone. Surely, Chuuya had dealt with his fair share of shrieking kids in his time. "I know you're excited, okay? But I was gonna say we should start with something easy."

“But I want the rollecoaste'.”

“No can do.”

“Please?”

“Nah. Pick something else.”

“Pleeeease!”

“Huh,” Chuuya hesitated, throwing a side glance in Dazai’s direction. “Well, I suppose we could…?”

“I don’t mind starting with the roller coasters if the pipsqueak thinks she can handle it,” he said, shrugging the question away. “It’s Chuuya who is too short to ride, anyway.”

“Ha?!”

Gracefully, Dazai side-stepped the backpack that Chuuya threw at him, and that settled it. Now, letting a child pick the first ride felt like a terrible idea but who was he to judge? Sonoko was tall enough to meet the height requirement (unlike Chuuya) and clearly wanted to have a go at enjoying the day (unlike Dazai), so the detective was certainly not going to rain on her not-so-metaphorical parade.

What truly annoyed Dazai about the place were the screams. The human body could barely tell between an ecstatic cry and one born from pain, and most people remained blissfully unaware of what *true* terror meant. They had nothing to scream about.

He forced himself to ignore the annoyance as they waited in line. Sonoko's excitement was palpable. She bounced on the balls of her feet and kept tugging at Chuuya’s hand, firing out questions in quick succession and mainly asking if he was scared. To his honor, Chuuya put on a happy face and pretended to be thrilled about - *drum roll, please* - being in the sky. Woho. The gravity manipulator, everyone. Excited about ‘being in the sky’. When he couldn’t hold back a snort, Chuuya kicked him in the shin ever so softly.

‘Asshole,’ Chuuya mouthed.

Dazai beamed back.

“You’re cute, Slug,” he answered.

On his end, Dazai had never been passionate about rides. He never had the chance to experience them as a child and, as an adult, he didn’t really get the hype. But one had to be innocent to see that magic, he guessed, and he had always been everything but that. By the time they reached the end of the line, he had completely spaced out.

Still, as they boarded the coaster, Dazai *wished* they could be like this forever: with Sonoko covering her ears as a rollercoaster thundered above their heads, squealing, footsies kicking in the air. His hollow heart felt something, then. Not quite excitement, but *tenderness*.

It seemed inconceivable that he might desire happiness and obtain it. *Keep* it, even.

The car creaked to life, slowly ascending the steep incline. “Nice view, huh?” Chuuya said. Dazai scoffed.

It did things to his stomach, to see Chuuya quite so delighted about— well, *gravity*. Something the executive could not control as long as he had Dazai and No Longer Human on the same ride.

With a sudden rush, the coaster hurtled down the tracks, screams of delight filling the air. As the car ascended to the highest point, Dazai found himself keeping an eye on Sonoko’s safety belt. The other riders tittered, some gripping the safety bars with white-knuckled intensity. All Dazai could see were toothy grins and tensed glares.

On the inside, Dazai remained composed. When one spent his life defying death, everything else felt somewhat insipid. Bland. Pointless, in a way, because what doesn’t kill you ruins every other rush of adrenaline *ever*. His stomach only twisted slightly during the initial ascent, and he barely felt the adrenaline rush that he was told accompanied such rides.

Still, as requested, Dazai threw his arms in the air, letting out a playful, high-pitched whoop. Sonoko’s amusement was worth the effort. It wasn't about the ride itself; it was about sharing this experience with her.

Throughout the twists, turns, and loops, Dazai continued to wear a wide grin for her sake only, eyes twinkling with delight. He might not have been thrilled by the roller coaster, but he *was* thrilled by the happiness he saw painted on Sonoko's face. Her infectious joy, a simple emotion that seemed so *alien* to him mattered way more than a cheap ride.

And, for the first time, Dazai wondered if he would have been happier about his present self if he and Odasaku had made any memories like this one; pure memories that didn’t turn into blades to rip his ribcage open whenever his mind remembered his best friend’s face.

After the rollercoaster, slightly wobbly on her knees, Sonoko demanded a ride on the teapots. They all agreed she was old enough to go in alone.

In that brief moment of privacy, Dazai pushed Chuuya against a wall, stole his hat to hide their faces, and kissed him breathless.

—

Dazai had been delighted to see that Sonoko's smile had become faster and brighter. Her ability had been picking up the trails of emotions swirling in the air, dissecting every slice of humanity she felt.

“I like it here,” she said at some point, “*The emotions are pink and yellow”*.

She held Chuuya's hand most of the time, glued to his side, with the executive navigating her wherever she wanted to go. Falling into step behind them, Dazai supposed Sonoko had been feeding on the electrifying rush of excitement emanating from the man, simmering into

positive emotions. Chuuya had this way of *living* — fully, unapologetically. He felt a lot and allowed himself to be open about it.

Dazai watched their intertwined fingers with a tinge of jealousy, aware of the special connection Sonoko shared with the executive.

Chuuya already had that *Peter Pan of Suribachi* attitude when they met — and look what good it did to him when his Lost Boys *(Lost Lambs? Ha!)* turned on him, planting a blade between his ribs. Chuuya had forgiven them. Dazai didn't understand that easiness. He would have skinned the little gremlins in the Sheep alive one by one to teach a lesson on trachery. Chuuya, though? He was way too tender-hearted.

Eventually, Sonoko rushed to Dazai once they walked closer to the haunted house, clasping his leg.

"Dazai-nii? Someone's scared," she said. "It's ugly."

Without a word, Dazai heaved her up into his arms with an exaggerated 'oof' that made her laugh, wrapping solid hands around her body. No Longer Human ran between them like a spark of electricity, silencing everything in its path.

"You're all fine, princess. Better?"

"H'mm."

"Is the ugly emotion gone now?"

"H'mm," she said again, relaxing into his hold. "It's silent. Dazai-nii is comfy."

Yeah, he supposed it was better.

Like them all, she would have to *live* with her ability one day, he guessed. She'd have to learn to deal with someone else's ugly emotions, with lacerating pleasures and overwhelming agonies that didn't belong to her. And it was going to be terrible, and it was going to be *overwhelming,* but she was born a soldier like her brothers. She'd survive like Chuuya, and find her deadly power like Verlaine. She'd turn pain into a weapon.

For now, though, Dazai had her back.

"Well, I'm glad," he said, allowing the child to sink her face into the crook of his neck. "All good, there? Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Too many emotions?"

"Not yet," she hummed. She sank her nose into his hair. "'M fine."

"If you get a headache, you tell us, okay?"

She nodded, and Dazai considered himself satisfied. That closed the conversation, with Sonoko occasionally finding refuge in Dazai's arms to recharge from the overload of emotions that didn't belong to her. He looked for Chuuya's eyes. He remembered how they used to laugh at people who lived their lives like this — people who didn't run in the night, who took their kids to the amusement park and finished the day exhausted, going to sleep early after hours in sun-soaked offices. They used to think of them as losers.

Now, older — more tired, and closely acquainted with death — Dazai had begun to change his mind. He'd embrace that loser lifestyle if he could. If *they* could.

He smiled, and Chuuya smirked back, and they pretended it meant nothing.

I guess being a loser isn't the worst, Dazai thought, *When losing tastes like winning.*

—

Chuuya had gone to grab some food when Dazai had the chance to talk to Sonoko. The child had scooted next to him, her pink and blue pants stained with mud (she'd fallen, her tumbling softened by Chuuya's ability).

When he asked, "Are you having fun, princess?" It truly, genuinely felt like the only question that mattered in the world.

She nodded, her gaze wandering to the crowd. "It's a happy place," she declared.

She never had particular issues with *crowds,* her body perfectly calibrated — and honed by experiments, he supposed — to withstand the psychological pressure. However, her mood swings were quick and unpredictable; a creature bent and whipped to answer every stimulation from the outside world. Just like Chuuya *knew* how to manipulate gravity, she just *knew* how to avoid that outside emotions would crush her. She'd been created for that. Her body had been cherry-picked among tiny identical clones to withstand the weight of her ability.

Someone else's suffering was the reason why she could *smile* now, saying the amusement park was pink with happiness and yellow with fear.

"But it's not a bad fear," Sonoko went on, batting her little legs as Dazai sat her atop a picnic table. He kept a steady hand on her, just to prevent her from falling.

"Enthusiasm?" He prompted.

"What's enthusiasm?"

"It's when you are afraid of something, but also want to give it a try. Something like the roller coaster rides we tried before."

Like his whole thing with Chuuya, he thought. Most days, it still felt like a fever dream. *God, they were real-life roller coasters.*

“Oh. ‘Kay,” she hummed. Her voice dipped as she lowered her head. “I don’t like the big wheel.”

Dazai halted. “You don’t?”

“There was one in the playroom.”

Good, his brain immediately clicked.
He didn’t expect Sonoko to talk about the playroom in the laboratory — she shut down when he asked, and Chuuya threatened to punch him if he insisted. *We don’t talk about that shit,* he said. *Either we don’t remember, or what we remember is not pleasant.*

Dazai had politely let Ango know that the discoveries about the lab situation would be dictated by the Port Mafia’s pace, and to not blame him if deadlines weren’t met. Which was a way to both blame Chuuya for any shortcomings in the investigation and hand him all the freedom he needed. But now he hovered closer, and Sonoko kept evading his gaze.

“You mean there was a Ferris wheel?” He nodded to the Cosmo Clock 21. “Like that one?”

“It was small.”

“Like a drawing?”

“No. It was A’s bag,” she insisted.

He imagined a bag with a pattern, the kind that a woman might have liked. That was something. “Do you remember who it belonged to? A doctor, a kid…?”

“Just, A.”

Dazai nodded. So this *A* was a person. Well.
That was about as useless as it got; he could presume the Osaka lab followed the same cringe code-name system as the one they infiltrated, with Dr. N using his initials, but he couldn’t be sure.

“Anything else?” He murmured, offering an encouraging smile to Sonoko as he grabbed his phone. “Did they wear something like a white coat? Can you try to remember for me, princess?”

While saying that, he flashed a text with the conversation to a number he had blocked more times than he could count — a number he had no pleasure in using. Mori better get to work and start digging.

The child shook her head.

“A played with me.”

“That’s great, sweetheart. And were there other children with you and A?”

Her eyes turned bigger. “They stopped coming to play.”

“I see,” Dazai murmured, taking in the information. So the batches of children slowly started getting thin as the subjects died during the experiments. “Did you have any children you were friends with? Any names?”

“H’m.”

“What do you play with, when A’s there?”

“Blocks.” She frowned. “And she always wears gloves. And she took me to the park once.”

Gloves.

He supposed it would be to not allow Sonoko to access her memories and deeper feelings; a protection against a highly destructive ability. *Smart.*

“That was nice, I bet,” he said, so very quiet. “Did you have fun at the park?”

She shook her head. “Not much. I learned about tension.”

“ *Tension?”*

“Tension is when you are afraid as if there’s a stranger under your bed. It was scary,” Sonoko explained. “I didn’t like it at all. They didn’t like it either. That is why they brought me back.”

“You’re saying A wasn’t alone?” Dazai pushed, fighting to keep his tone leveled. “Who was there? Do you remember?”

Sonoko closed her shoulders, though, her eyes darkening as she didn’t reply.

“So—“ he couldn’t even finish before she pressed both her palms against her ears, shutting her eyes closed for a moment. Then she lifted her head and looked at Dazai, and her eyes were wide open and *hollow.*

I don’t remember, those eyes said. *I don’t want to remember. Please. Don’t make me go there. Don’t wanna. Don’t wanna.*

She lied when she said she didn’t remember, and her refusal spoke louder than most truths. Dazai retreated instantly, masks dialing back to a somewhat reassuring expression.

"Well~ You have a wonderful gift, princess, and you have been very brave telling me about A," he whispered, ruffling her hair. Her attention had started slipping, a sulking expression forming on her face. "And you don’t need to focus on anything scary right now, okay? Let’s have fun.” He squeezed her shoulders. “Sorry for pushing you.”

“I want Chuuya-nii.”

God, me too, he thought. He might have fucked up.

“Do you like Chuuya?” He asked, instead, offering the child his most reassuring expression. It usually made her smile, but she avoided his gaze now.

“He’s happy. He’s always bright.”

Dazai scoffed a chuckle. Defining Chuuya — the lamb king of grumpy ramblings — ‘always happy’ would have been a *stretch:* he was grumpy, hot-headed, constantly overworked, and battling sleep deprivation often enough. But she had known the good part of the executive, after all, a part that most adults tended to exploit to the bone. “You want to know a secret, Sonoko-chan? Chuuya is very, very happy when he is with you.”

Sonoko's eyes scintillated, and she pointed a finger at him. “Dazai-nii should be happy too.”

“I am happy.”

“No, you’re not,” she said.

Dazai clicked his tongue, trying to ignore the subtext while it still hit him in the face like a full-force, out-of-the-blue tsunami. To be honest it was the most terrifying trial he’d ever faced.

Happiness was never free, in this bloodthirsty world of his. Life taught him that moments like these were precious and all too ephemeral.

Don’t get used to this, a voice told him, *Have you learned nothing, you idiot? Peace doesn’t last.*

Good things never do.

—

Sonoko had taught Dazai that people’s emotions were colorful smears on a much bigger canvas. Neon colors — green and yellow and pink and blue, popping in the darkness, that told a story of invisible emotions woven in the tapestry of self. Colorful threads, ever-changing. Fear was red. Anger was orange. Joy was pink.

Sitting facing one another in one of the gondolas of the Ferris wheel, Dazai wondered what could be the color of Chuuya’s soul. Was it blue like the ocean, like the expanse of sea trapped in his eyes? Was it green — hope-green, positive green, everything-is-going-to-be-okay green? Or was it red, like his ability, or like the fierce shade of his hair?

He wondered if maybe Chuuya was a rainbow of mixed emotions — but the executive’s distant smile didn’t really help, either, because every time Dazai looked at it, he got distracted. His mind happily sidetracked and he forgot about his quest in the first place. He forgot about himself, and his name, and whatever he was thinking.

Nakahara Chuuya turned a genius into a jester. Even worse, he did so without even trying. And it was marvelous, and it was *scary.*

“She’s fallen asleep,” Chuuya announced.

Dazai grinned, looking at how the man petted Sonoko's hair. The city was sprawled under them like a lover, naked in the night and only covered in flickering lights. It rolled with every mechanical movement of the Ferris wheel, a comfortable silence encompassing the cabin. Under them, opened the majestic vastness of the bay. Dazai could see the skyline that rimmed the Oceanside — the case of the Gundam factory, yellow and red and white, the landmark tower, the Port Mafia buildings.

Sonoko was sleeping on Chuuya's lap, breathing softly and humming on occasion.

Her brown hair had spilled on Chuuya's knees as she rested, his fingers carding through the strands as she grasped at his trousers.

"You know," Chuuya murmured, turning to the window, "I see the bay so often that I almost forget how beautiful it can be. It's just something that is— there, I suppose. That I take for granted."

Right, Dazai thought, *you are beautiful.* He wondered if Chuuya knew all he wanted to do was name all the freckles on his cheeks and nose like stars, counting them with his lips. Fuck the bay, frankly. "Right."

"How many times have we saved the city, ya reckon?"

Dazai tilted his head to the side as the cabin came to a halt. It clacked — a loud noise of engines followed by a gentle stop to allow the passengers to admire the landscape that unraveled in front of their eyes. A moment to enjoy Yokohama, and relish being alive in the moment. Living those moments, the drifting kind that never come back, and that would become fond memories down the line.

"Many times. I might have lost count." Dazai's eyes hardened. "Sonoko talked about the Lab today."

Immediately, Chuuya's shoulders straightened. "And…?"

"We have an initial for a doctor, A, and a bag with a Ferris wheel pattern. I sent the President *and* Mori a transcript of my little chat with Sonoko, so they can investigate. And the doctor taking care of Pillow Diaries wasn't *alone,* though that was obvious enough." He wetted his lips. "They'd take Sonoko to parks to hone her ability, but she said it was tense. It must not have been pleasant."

"Do you think they meant to sell her? Black market, some sort of trafficking network?"

"I think they must have been aware of her value." He inhaled. "Ango is not wrong. Weapons like her are bought and sold every day, and the regulations for Abilities suck, you know that."

"The Port Mafia finds human trafficking organizations and stops them, we—"

"The Port Mafia is never going to be *everywhere,* Chuuya," Dazai stopped him. "No matter how hard you try, no one can control all the Ability Users market in Japan. It's not realistic and, frankly speaking, you can't do it."

Chuuya glared at him.

“That’s a shitty thing to say.”

“But it’s true. You can’t save everyone.”

He had been sold in his own house before running away to save his life. He fled that house to stop being an instrument in the greedy hands of adults, and Chuuya now gritting his teeth did nothing to change the fact that his efforts in the Port Mafia were never going to be *enough.*

‘Hold this person’s hand,’ his father had told him, ‘nullify them for me, Shuuji.’

They’d shoot the ability users while Dazai was holding their hands, rendering them nothing but normal people in the last fateful moments of their lives. His face was always splashed with someone else’s blood. Soon, too, he covered his face in bandages to make it easier for him to be cleaned, to dismiss the proof of divine justice.

And so Dazai was a child and a judge, and the angel of death.

“You know, I *do* wonder what younger us would say,” he murmured. He had to change the topic.

“About the laboratories? ‘Cause let me tell ya, I’d be fuming.”

“About *us.”*

Chuuya snorted, his mood shifting subtly. “Ha? Bet they’d laugh their asses off and call us a couple of sappy old men,” he declared, not a second of hesitation in his voice. “And they’d be right. Bet not even you saw this shitshow coming, yeah?”

Dazai forced a grin on his face. He looked at Sonoko, at how quietly she slept on Chuuya’s lap.

“The *child* is a surprise, yes,” he admitted. “Chuuya’s child-like height is not.”

“Jackass,” Chuuya said. It had no bite, and Dazai decided he deserved it.

“You know, Slug, maybe your little shrimp-ass would make fun of us, but my younger self would congratulate me.” He huffed, resting his forehead against the cold window. He took in Chuuya: his beauty, his *presence.* Two organizations later, and they were still together. His lips curled up. “You know, he *did* have a crush on his partner, my younger self. Still has, by the way.”

Chuuya’s lips parted in an '*o*'. “...Shit. Right. You like me.”

“You still sound surprised, chibi.”

“Yeah, well, I—” his voice trailed off, and he shot a glance at the bay. “Honestly, I wasn’t expecting *any* of this to happen. I thought nothing of it beyond sheltering a kid and harboring your stranded, fishy ass in my house. And that says something, because I prepare for a shitton

of things when it comes to you; dangerous plans, death, *Corruption.* Things I don't have a choice to refuse."

"You always have a choice."

"Whenever you say that, it means there is no *other* choice. You'll make space for another choice for me, to accommodate *me,* and that comes with greater losses." He pinched his nose, scoffing a breath from his nostrils. "I am prepared for whatever you throw at me, ya know, but I never prepared for being *together.* Not in this sense." A deep sigh. "So, no. I wasn't expecting to be having a playdate with a traitor. It's just a lot."

Dazai's head bobbed down. "I hear that."

"What I mean, I guess, is that I wasn't expecting *us,"* Chuuya said, without peeling his gaze away from the window even though his hands kept on petting Sonoko. The gondola rattled under them, shaken by the wind.

"No," Dazai admitted. "Neither did I."

"You've been right here all my life. How are *you,* of all things, a surprise?"

Dazai didn't answer.

Under them, he saw the ocean. The stars reflected in the glittery crest of the waves.

He *did* feel holy.

He was stupid and young, and he was in love. He felt like a young god on top of the world when he moved across the cabin and kissed Chuuya. They moved carefully, mindful not to wake the child asleep between them. He smiled against Chuuya's mouth, feeling untethered and weightless. The Cosmo Clock 21 creaked, whirring, and came alive as their mouths found each other — now, and again, as the stars descended into the sea.

—

Sonoko's arrival and adjusting his rhythms around the child's schedule gave Chuuya something he had never considered before: *a routine*. Everyday rituals that stumbled one into the other until they became a colorful, unified, solid string of habits. Breakfast wasn't just takeaway coffee on the way to work anymore. He didn't fall asleep on the couch and wake up in the same place in the morning, neck crooked and joints aching.

It changed Chuuya's life as seasons blended one into another – padding in on velvet-like steps, bringing forward tiny changes that sat into his life. It was a revolution that marched on with the soft voice of an earthquake.

This new life had given him Dazai, too.

Mornings together, breakfasts, coffee breaks, and text messages. The text messages were the most soothing part of his usually dry existence, if one asked Chuuya. Checking on one another without reason – not 'Are you alive?' texts but mundane 'Are you bored?' and 'Have

you eaten?' – was an unexpected but tender daily display of care. Chuuya had quickly grown fond of it.

He always cared about his partner, Chuuya. These days, however, he made a conscious effort to show it.

"And do you love me?" Dazai asked one day when they were tucked under the covers of their bed. Chuuya snuggled closer to his partner, his feet and hands looking for Dazai's solid warmth under the blankets. The gauze felt rough under his touches.

"Of course."

"And you love me more than your work, I hope."

"You're clingy," he said, lifting an eyebrow. Dazai huffed, pressing his nose against Chuuya's arm like a puppy.

"And Chuuya's grumpy."

"I'm trying to get some goddamn sleep."

A stance that clearly was not going to deter Dazai from acting like a menace, because the man kicked his legs and scooted closer. He rested one hand on Chuuya's pecs.

"So, quiz time."

Oh no. "Quiz time," he echoed, trying to decide if he had enough strength to crawl to the couch to escape.

"Would you still want me if I were a garbage truck?"

Chuuya had a feeling that, in another life, he would have fought that statement and pretended at least that it wasn't true. Not immediately, at least. But he had no reason left to fight, because a man doesn't have to *fight* if he's winning.

He kissed Dazai instead. He kissed him slow, and he kissed him deep, and he tried to remind him that maybe, maybe they were a little useless and broken and slightly damaged – but they were good enough for each other. They were bent trees and dirty shores, they were a ruined landscape and a sunset that could have been beautiful, had it not been tainted by clouds. But they belonged to one another, and that was precious in itself.

His hands trailed down his boyfriend's spine, slow and purposeful, lingering on the hem of Dazai's pants.

"Osamu," he said, sounds rolling on his tongue like molten honey. "*Shut up."*

And then, he kissed Dazai again.

—

Nakahara Chuuya didn't want many things in his life, and he learned that expecting nothing was a safe bet to never wind up disappointed.

He found that wanting something meant, more often than not, setting in place an odd mechanism that only pushed said things far from him. Everything he desired either died or became unreachable. So he had learned to ask for nothing, lest he would find himself repulsed by the intensity of his own desire. But that could only last so long, he could only endure that much strain.

If he were honest, really honest, Chuuya wanted peace. *A family.*

Dazai had not been wrong: he wasn't too young to be a father or a brother, when all he did was risk his life every single day. He had enough street credit. He was definitely *crazy* enough to do stupid shit, too — stupid stuff like joining the mafia, breaking his partner out of a prison, and thinking about adopting a kid.

"What if we adopt her?"

The proposal came out of Chuuya's lips naturally and unexpectedly – like a crack of thunder splitting the sky in two, when heavy clouds threatened to pour out on a drought. It had the devastating power of a rainstorm over a desert: where the earth was thirsty and then it was satiated, and then it was drowning, and then it was dead. His voice sounded foreign as he spoke. His face felt oddly out of place as Dazai's head snapped up and brown irises stared at him from across the living room with wide, alienated eyes.

Genuine discomfort passed across the detective's face as he lowered the book he'd been skimming until that point.

"Sorry," Dazai said. His tone implied 'What the hell, what the *actual* hell.' "Come again?"

Chuuya stared back. Unafraid, not budging. He understood that Dazai's question implicitly required him to change his stance, to say 'Hey, you know what, maybe I was wrong. Ignore me.' – but he didn't because he didn't want to. It felt liberating to not do things just because others wanted him to. He should have tried that more often.

Truth was, few of his interpersonal relationships left him as free to express himself as the one with Dazai. People kept saying he got swayed and dragged into Dazai's plans; they said he got talked and manipulated into things, and that Chuuya's voice wasn't heard in their partnership. That was wrong. He could allow himself to be honest with Dazai, and there would be no repercussions. They heard each other. Other people just didn't always *understand* their tones.

"What if we adopt the kiddo?" Chuuya said again.

Dazai turned a page of his book. "You've hit your head." He stopped for a moment. "…Wait. Is it an Ability talking? Are we under siege?"

"Ha-ha. Very fucking funny."

“Has your ugly hat finally made you stupid?”

“I’m serious.”

“Ah, then it’s wonderful. Sure, let’s adopt the kid and why don’t we set up a kindergarten while we’re at it? Adopt a dog, since you like them so much. Build ourselves a nice cottage in the countryside.”

“Dazai,” he repeated. “I mean it.”

For the third time, Dazai looked at him. Only, this time, it was different. It wasn’t mocking or erratic – but his partner was truly regarding him and his intentions now. *That* was a first. And Chuuya knew that, in that second, Dazai too could grasp a glimpse of a future together.

“Oh. You *are* serious.”

“I told you I am.”

Dazai sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s not that simple. We’re not exactly the poster boys for responsible parenthood.”

“We can learn.”

“That’d be terrible.”

Chuuya scoffed. “A shitty family is better than none at all.”

He truly believed that. Dazai shot him a skeptical look, but there was a glimmer of something in his eyes – a hint of longing Chuuya had not noticed before, and he wondered if the man was thinking about Oda Sakunosuke and his orphans. “Does your Slug brain think we can pull it off? For real, people like us?”

“Why not? We’re doing just fine right now.”

“We are…” Dazai wet his lips, visibly scrambling for the correct term, “…new.”

“I’m not asking you to marry me, shithead, just to keep this mission going for a while longer. And we’ve worked together for seven years, that’s hardly *new*.”

“This might not be the best arrangement for a child — and that is without counting our organizations, even. Or did Chuuya forget the whole ‘live every day like it’s the last, because it certainly might be’ part of our job description?”

Chuuya’s bottom lip jutted out. Dazai had a point, but also *not.* “But who else can silence her Ability? We understand her.” He countered, asking himself why his desires were so stupidly unreachable. He wondered if he was insane or simply delusional.

With a quiet sound from his throat, Dazai settled the book on the sofa’s armrest and got up instead. He padded to Chuuya, his steps featherlight but his gaze heavy.

Chuuya squirmed in place as he waited. Dazai's silence had always been the heaviest thing about him.

The executive pretended that every second didn't weigh on him. He pretended it didn't hurt like acid being trickled down his throat.

So he waited. He waited as Dazai walked to him, and kneeled at his feet and reached out for his hands. The detective squeezed them, enveloping Chuuya's bare knuckles in long, cold fingers.

"Chuuya," he murmured, and there was a whole lot of heart inside that single clump of syllables. Chuuya shivered. How soft his name could sound, on those lips. "This is risky. And *dumb.*" A sigh. "Possibly the dumbest thing I've heard, and I work with *very* thick civilians."

"I guess."

"It's a lot to ask of our organizations, too."

"I know, I know. But she's sweet, and we have a place for her right here, and we could… I guess, unpack a shitload of stuff she went through. She sees us as older brothers, and I'm fine with that. I dealt with Corruption before and you quiet down her ability, you make her feel like she's not that different from other children; at the very least, we are suitable candidates to raise her. If we're being honest, we are the *only* candidates."

"You're a mafia executive."

Despite the featherlight tone, Chuuya's expression hardened. He tried to tug his hands away from Dazai's grip with no success.

"That I am," he answered, lifting his chin. "So I'm not allowed to be anything *more* than that?"

"That's not what I'm saying," Dazai answered, eyes narrowing —and yet, they both knew some people would do anything in their power to obliterate Chuuya's self-esteem enough to make him think exactly that. People like Mori, like N. "You'd make a wonderful parent, Chuuya. It's just dangerous."

"If I ask, Boss will make arrangements. It's in his best interest that Sonoko stays within reach, and it's in *Sonoko's* best interest to stay with us. That is true for the Agency, too."

"Ango is not going to like it," Dazai said. He skimmed dry, gentle lips over the back of Chuuya's hand, mulling over the proposal. "But you've got a solid point."

"Do you still think it's a terrible idea?"

"I do. Still one of the most stupid things I've heard, too," he admitted, voice leveled. Every word sounded cherry-picked to not commit to anything, but to not shatter hopes either. "Still, I think it's something worth exploring, at the very least, if you want to consider it — *if* you think it can work out, if you want me in."

The wad of cotton in Chuuya's throat tightened. God, he thought. *God.* His hands twitched in Dazai's grip as he swallowed, and he could have cried and he could have laughed as the entire world shifted under his feet.

"Ya kidding? Of course you're in."

"So I'm moving in?"

"Not at all. If we're co-parenting you can find your own place, ya freeloader."

At the joke, Dazai's frown relaxed. "And the Agency is in."

That, at the very least, had Chuuya deliberate over the decision more in-depth. He would have adopted Sonoko as a *person*, not because of a clause in his job description that said 'good with kids'. He wanted to raise a human being, and see to Sonoko's needs and happiness as she grew into her power. He wanted to do what a pack of young talented men in the mafia had done with him with the little time they had been granted together. He longed to be somebody's flag.

"No," Chuuya said, and shook his head. "That's out of the question."

A single wrinkle cut Dazai's forehead. "Then we don't have a deal."

For a terrible moment, his hands left Chuuya's, and an unbearable coldness washed over the executive – it was then that the executive took his partner's hands and held onto them, *clutched* them. "What I mean here is, no Agency and no Port Mafia," he explained, in a hushed voice. "Your colleagues and Doc Glasses want to be involved as friends, fine. Ane-san wants to be an aunt or whatever, equally fine. Verlaine wants to buy a fuckin' farm and take the kiddo there for the summer, be my fucking guest. But we're not bringing in either organization when we would be keeping her as—" Chuuya swallowed "—well, people."

"A couple?" Dazai echoed.

"A partnership."

Dazai's smile melted – sweet like a summer day, slightly melancholic. "A family."

"I like the sound of it," Chuuya said. "What do you say?"

"I like it too."

Dazai was right. It *was* foolish.

Yet, now, Chuuya dared believe it would work — for a moment, he hoped and hoped and *hoped*. He basked in that confidence as Dazai tugged him in, kissed his mouth, and chased another kiss as soon as Chuuya pulled away to call him greedy. Chuuya cupped his face and thought that he liked this vantage point, with Dazai kneeling at his feet and still touching his legs and breaking through all of his defenses.

They'd been each other's family for so long that it seemed natural — obvious, even — to take someone else under their wing.

To break through the margins and expand like the river during monsoon season – a river that could still grow into an oasis when fed with enough rain, claiming the land that had been stolen by four years of drought. They were a domesticated natural disaster, he and Dazai. They could nurture, and they could destroy, and they could choose for themselves as they claimed their free will back piece by piece.

That left only *one* person to convince.

—

As he and Chuuya stood side by side in the opulent Ozaki headquarters, stiff as two children ready to face a scolding, Dazai thought he could throw up.

He *was* going to throw up at the end of this, if he still had a stomach that Kouyou hadn't slashed open.

There was a legend, in the Port Mafia, that the Golden Demon could cut through iron. She could make her way through any kind of armor, a ghost striking down the most skilled fighters. Long story short, Kouyou Ozaki scared the shit out of her subordinates.

Not Chuuya, though.

Chuuya was her little brother through and through — the one she had chosen for herself — and he looked at the woman with a fondness that could only stem from understanding; both bloodstained machines draped in pretty clothes, flowers in the darkness. Monsters clad in precious silk.

Kouyou adored her adopted brother in her own way.

That was why Dazai didn't doubt for a second that he was going to face the shit show of a lifetime. Kouyou was going to murder him. And *then* she was going to bring him back to lecture him and Chuuya on responsibility (too late), taxes (*way* too late), and the correct use of condoms (fair enough, but still very much too late).

Kouyou scanned their movements, patiently waiting, as they toed off their shoes at the entrance of the tatami room, shifting into a pair of slippers that had been offered to them at the entrance. She stood tall — just another work of art among lavish paper screens, delicate gold with painted cranes, and ikebana compositions.

The only modern accent in her office room was the mahogany desk pushed in an alcove, with a buzzing laptop sitting atop the lacquered surface.

Dazai didn't envy the poor bastards working in the brothels. The feng shui alone (or lack thereof) made him want to jump out of a window, and work-life balance had never been a big priority for Mori Corp. He didn't miss any of it.

Nothing of this shit was *natsukashii.*

(He might have had to rethink about growing a child around this kind of interior design and life culture, but that was a problem for future Dazai. Future Dazai probably hated him).

“Ane-san,” Chuuya said, and bowed his head. Dazai followed.

"Lads.” Kouyou tilted her head just so, beckoning them closer. She regarded them with a sharp pause, how their knuckles brushed one against the other, Dazai’s pale skin against Chuuya’s black gloves. “It is certainly a surprise to see you two together outside of a hospital room.”

“That’s not funny,” Chuuya hummed.

“It *is* a little funny,” Dazai echoed.

She had a point, though. More than devastating rivals, Kouyou likely knew them as the *Devastating Nuisance she had to babysit.* The *Devastatingly Annoying Toddlers.*

“What’s the matter, now?” By the sharpness of her tone, Dazai didn’t consider this ‘kicking off with the right foot.’ It was more like ‘tumbling into a mess ass-first.’ “Speak. I don’t have time for puerile quarrels.”

Chuuya threw a hesitant side glance at him and Dazai nodded. ‘You go for it, Slug,’ he mouthed, ‘I’ll back you up.’

How many times did he swear the same thing, albeit without words, and how many times had he broken that promise?

Chuuya cleared his throat, hiding the cough behind his gloved fist. “I wanted to discuss my future in the organization, Ane-san.” A pause that had Dazai waiting, the pit of his stomach fisted into the icy grip of an invisible hand.

Kouyou frowned at him before her gaze flickered to Dazai. Dealing with her had always been a— *humbling,* experience, so to speak. At twenty-three, Dazai still found it mildly terrifying.

“Surely you’re not retiring, lad.”

“No. No, Dazai and I had— well. I had a proposal for you.”

“You know better than to discuss anything behind Boss’ back, Chuuya.” Her lips curled up as she leveled him with a glance. “Unless, of course, this is a coup. Ambitious, but not unprecedented. Mori-dono always thought that this… little experimental *allegiance* of his might turn against him, one day.”

Chuuya’s face turned as pale as the tatami. “What?”

Dazai snorted. Not that he never considered manipulating Chuuya out of the mafia before, but the concept of a Double Black rebellion hit Chuuya so openly that it was almost *cute* to witness.

“Are you surprised, lad? Experiments backfire.”

“I’m loyal to the organization. You should know that.”

“And you are powerful, too. You both are, lad, and your partner is not above betrayal.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“Ah, see, Ane-san, that’s the tricky part,” Dazai chimed in, hiding behind a smile. Something told him that the word *experiment* had not been picked carelessly, just in case Double Black had truly decided to turn. “Chuuya’s loyalty to the organization is absolute — and a bit revolting, if you ask me. I tried with no luck.”

Chuuya’s posture stiffened, but Kouyou’s lips quirked up as she said, “You sound disappointed, Dazai-kun.”

“It annoys me enough, yep.”

“So you vouch for Chuuya’s loyalty.”

He forced a bone-dry smile on his face. *Fucking hell, she was grilling them.* “I don’t have to.”

Impatient for a change of subject, Chuuya clicked his tongue. “As I was gonna say, it’s regarding the mission,” he clarified. “Given the current arrangement, Dazai and I had some time to talk about the situation. We have thought further about the Government’s requirements for raising Sonoko, and we've come to a decision.”

Kouyou’s eyes burrowed in Chuuya’s face. “*We,”* she echoed. It sounded like a curse.

“Dazai and I,” Chuuya insisted.

“I heard that.”

“We want to keep her.”

Kouyou's eyebrows raised ever so slightly. She took in Chuuya’s voice as if to understand what to make of it. The quietness of her anger reached Dazai like faraway ripples, as if they had caused an underwater earthquake and were just living through the shockwave. She started more, lips pale and thin, balancing the statement and deciding if it was a poor-taste joke or a terrible recognition of power — two monsters growing into their humanity. Discovering that, if they rubbed one against the other strongly enough, the friction could even create a spark of light.

Her gaze transitioned to Dazai, and it *rested* there. “You have no desire to raise another human being, Osamu,” she declared.

He shook his head. “Who knows? Maybe I’ve changed.”

“Tell me, what are you gaining from it?”

“I want it as much as Chuuya does. Genuinely.”

Chuuya, he thought, and it felt far away and foolish, like a child crying to be saved from a world of adults. *I gain Chuuya, and a crumb of happiness that won't be tied to our jobs or an organization. That'd be a first in and of itself.*

But he would cut off his tongue before admitting it, and Kouyou had already turned her attention back to the executive.

"I remember you wanting to abort the mission, lad; you sounded quite sure. Why the change of heart — and so suddenly, I might add?"

Before he could stop himself, Dazai stepped forward. His posture remained composed despite the irritation buzzing under his skin; a barbed instinct for protection.

"Rather than a change of heart, Ane-san, frankly, it's a realization. Outside of our respective organizations, we're more than capable of taking care of an ability user. It's in the best interest of Sonoko — and our *own,* as people, separated from the Agency and the Port Mafia"

Kouyou didn't react, her silence lingering as she waited for a more detailed explanation. Her long fingers drummed on the table.

"The child needs stability," Chuuya argued. At least, *that* had Kouyou's eyebrow arch.

"Stability," she echoed. "With Double Black. Surely I misheard."

"I *know* how it might sound, but I promise we can provide that for her," Chuuya insisted, pinching the bridge of his nose. A part of Dazai was glad that the irony of *them* talking about offering peace to someone wasn't lost on anyone in the room. "I learned to control Corruption. What if Pillow Diaries reveals an unhinged state, too? Something locked behind a code?"

"That is plausible, yes."

"Chuuya can train her," Dazai said.

Chuuya nodded. "And Dazai can nullify Pillow Diaries at any time."

"Besides, it would create a unified, stronger link between the pillar organizations in the city. What better outcome than Double Black still collaborating?"

"You two don't need a child to collaborate, lad, nor a reason. All you need are orders."

"But would it be so terrible if I *wanted* a child, too?" Chuuya replied, voice laced with a vehemence that caused Dazai to flinch and turn to face him.

Oh, he thought, for the first time since he had given serious consideration to Chuuya's proposal, Chuuya truly longed for a family. That was the ultimate stage of his blind loyalty. And Kouyou would rather fight Mori than negate something Chuuya requested outright — something he had a *reason* to desire, even.
Something that she could live vicariously through him.

They had won that battle from the beginning.

Pursing her lips, Kouyou padded closer to the veranda. She bought time adjusting her kimono sleeves — the purple and pink silk fell by her sides, a waterfall of precious fabric.

"…May I ask what has convinced you two to ask for this responsibility?"

"We've grown, I suppose," Chuuya mumbled, somewhat *boyishly,* lowering his face. He didn't blush, and Dazai surprised himself by realizing that he was the one with red-tinged, burning cheeks. Even his ears and neck felt warmer. They had grown indeed.

"You're not free to decide for yourselves; you're not civilians, you're not owners of your lives. The government will choose for you."

Chuuya nodded. "We still thought asking would be a decent first step."

"Today's words have tossed a rock in a quiet lake, lad. There will be consequences. The shockwave will be vast."

"We're ready to accept them, Ane-san. We've thought it through."

Dazai grimaced to himself. No, they did not.
If they were being honest, here, they had acted on impulse and wishful thinking like the insufferable idiots everyone insisted they were. But that was fine all the same, Dazai thought, because some of the best outcomes blossomed from a gut feeling and a handful of rushed decisions. Working with Chuuya had taught him that.

"What do you have to say, Dazai-kun?" Kouyou turned to him, her mellow question hiding an edge. "What does your President think?"

"I'm here as Chuuya's partner, Ane-san. Not as a member of the Agency."

"So you haven't told him."

"Not yet, no. But I can't imagine anyone having issues with the request, either."

Cocking her head, Kouyou observed them for a moment. Her gaze burrowed into them, expression inscrutable — and for a second Dazai felt *naked,* exposed to the marrow, his tendons and muscles slippery and shiny and wet and in plain sight.

Then she sighed, and her armor seemed to thaw as her lips curled into a pout.

"Very well. I will take your plea to Boss and, if this goes anywhere, you have my support."

Chuuya dropped in a deep bow. "Thank you, Ane-san. My commitment to the Port Mafia remains unwavering. This is *personal."*

"Personal requests are not like you, boy."

"Yet here I am," he said.

Swallowing, Dazai tried to shake off the string of impure thoughts about how *gorgeous* Chuuya looked, fighting for a dream.

Kouyou looked at him without a word, her sharp gaze moving between the two as she considered their case.
They might have been standing, but they had been begging all along.
You've grown into an adult, lad, she seemed to say. In that subtle shift in her expression – from skepticism to something resembling contemplation — Dazai wondered if she'd noticed how Chuuya had grown from his King of the Sheep days.

They exchanged a glance, a flicker of hope surfacing in their eyes.

However, as Kouyou's gaze lingered on them, Dazai realized that she had picked up on a detail that he himself failed to notice. A detail he should have *controlled.* He and Chuuya stood close, their shoulders almost touching; their secrets were exposed by the briefest touches, by the way they closed into one another's space without meaning to.

She raised an amused eyebrow.

"I see. So this is a love matter." She let out a soft scoff. "You two have always been the most annoying kids. You may go now — I will do what I can, but you owe me."

Chuuya bowed. "Thank you."

"If the kid refers to me like an old aunt while under your roof, Chuuya, I'll hold you personally responsible."

Despite himself, Dazai couldn't help but smile. His shoulders sagged, relief washing through him as he looked for Chuuya's eyes – and Christ, he *wanted* to look for Chuuya's mouth too, but he had a feeling that would not be smart. Kouyou would have beheaded him for touching her precious pupil.

Once at home, though—

Kouyou scoffed as if she could read his mind, a hint of amusement coloring her dismissal as she urged them to go bother someone else with their plans of playing house. With that, she waved them off.

As they dipped into another bow and exited the office, Dazai's fingers stretched to caress the smooth inside of Chuuya's wrist, soft skin just above the edge of his gloves.

Love, huh? Love, *truly.*

—

"Say, jackass, are you not gonna ask me to sleep with you?" Chuuya asked one night, as Dazai slipped under the cover of their shared bed. Just *like that.* Boom. Better take off the band-aid while he still wasn't used to this new relationship.

Sonoko would not hear a thing, with her heavy sleep and the closed door that separated their bedrooms. They'd still let her sleep in the master bedroom if she asked, but recently she had insisted on 'being a grown-up and sleeping alone.'

As her teacher told him, the other kids had gotten wind that she'd still sleep with somebody else and called her a whiny baby because of it.

Chuuya offered to punch all the parents of those snotty kids in the face, and Dazai – unhelpfully – commented that probably it wasn't the best parental approach.

Anyway.

On the bright side, the executive supposed that having his partner in the privacy of his own bed would also mean sex, likely sooner rather than later. Dazai didn't exactly have the reputation of a gentleman, and Chuuya knew better than to demand a chivalrous treatment from a scoundrel.

He didn't *expect* it, either.

Instead, apart from kissing his neck and slipping his hand into his back pocket, Dazai had done nothing particularly *filthy* in the weeks that stretched after their confession. It felt suspicious.

"No, I'm not going to *ask* anything like that," Dazai said. He sounded quiet as he studied Chuuya's face. "Is that what you think of me?"

"I think you have no filters."

"And yet I have *decency."*

Chuuya gnawed at his bottom lip. Debatable, he thought, because he had seen how Dazai acted with his flings. He was a flirt and a scoundrel. For a second, he wondered if he was undesirable; if Dazai maybe was too tactful to say that, despite their platonic and romantic feelings, he had no intention of sleeping with a man. "I see," he murmured.

"Chuuya," Dazai whispered, framing his face. "Hey. *No.* That's not— I want it, I want *you*. You can't be doubting it. Have you looked in a mirror in the last seven years?" Chuuya flinched at the question, but Dazai's thumb skimming down his cheekbone kept him grounded. "What I want, though, is some *actual* privacy," Dazai continued. "I don't want to worry about a child in the house because I want to have all your attention, but either of our workplaces won't do. Not just yet. One more daydream about a semi-silent quickie in the Agency's infirmary and I'm going to *scream*."

"You want it to be loud," Chuuya guessed, which coaxed a smirk out of the other man. He always supposed Dazai liked his encounters quiet and fast, much like his relationships, but the way his eyes gleamed told him he was wrong.

"I would like that, yes. I want Chuuya to be loud for me."

Although Chuuya rolled his eyes, it was performative. He wanted to be loud for Dazai too, and wanted to be *everything* for him. His late nights and early mornings. All his life and then some more.

“I suppose I can do that.” He grinned, and his heart skipped a beat when he realized Dazai was wearing a twin smirk. His fingers ran up Chuuya’s arm, featherlight, lighting up a thousand fireflies under his skin, and the executive shivered. “If *you* can keep up.”

“Bet I can wear you out?”

“If you’re ready to lose, sure.”

Dazai’s voice was soft and his touch was softer. “Why, *Chuuya,* that’s naïve. I’ve had ages to imagine what I wanted us to do.”

“You did, ha? That’s a relief.” He huffed, hoping the fake disappointment in his tone could hide the relief lying underneath. “At this point, I thought you didn’t *want* to sleep with me that much.”

“Again, that’s insane. Why would you think that?”

“Well– I had a few years to overthink, I suppose.”

Dazai shrugged, looking for his hand and lacing their fingers together. “It’s that stupid brain-cell-frying hat of yours; it’s making Chibi senile ahead of time. But– no, *no*, look at me. I do want you, I promise,” he answered, with a quiet resolve that made Chuuya fall a little harder for him. “But I waited for seven years. What is a few days more, if I can have you all to myself for the rest of my life?”

And when they did sleep together, it was everything Chuuya wanted and imagined and so much more.

Chapter End Notes

As always, major thanks to the wonderful Ceres and Malaika ❤️ And thank YOU for reading ❤️

Comments and kudos are my lifeblood and I can’t wait to hear your theories 👀 and next chapter THERE’S DRAMA! So buckle up 😉
Say hi on Twitter!

Darkside

Chapter Summary

> “We lost all ways to confirm Chuuya’s humanity when he was younger, right before he activated the unhinged form of his special ability for the first time.
>
> I was the one to tell him that — that activating Corruption would erase the data of his experiments.”
>
> [Or: A kidnapping, a rescue mission, The Gravity Manipulator and The Demon Prodigy]

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tsugarou
17 Years Before

Dazai ate his supper alone in the nursery that evening, like the night before and the night before that.

The room felt stifling despite the five-tatami space, welcoming a dinner table, several shelves of books and a TV with games scattered around the console. His calligraphy tools lay forgotten on a chiseled wooden coffee table.

His first brother had walked out of the estate in the late afternoon, headed to the cinema with his high school friends, exhausting himself in the task of appearing normal — unlike Dazai, that was. Bunji’s little monster of a brother. His *no longer human* brother, Mother said.

Where Dazai was covered in bandages and bruises, his flesh blooming in green and blue, Bunji’s skin appeared as gleaming and white and perfect as a rice bowl.

Mother likes Bunji better, everyone said. Bunji was *promising.*

Instead, Mother appeared ashen every time she crossed him in the household.

“Take him away,” she always ordered, “I can’t bear the sight of him.”

‘You used to love me, Mother,’ Dazai imagined arguing. ‘I was a part of you.’

‘Oh, my baby, I did love you. I did, *before*.’ She always replied in his head, giving him a lifeless smile. ‘But you’re not human like you used to be.’

It's okay, Dazai always thought.
Lately, since he excelled in everything from calligraphy to schoolwork, all the way up to nullifying Abilities, Father gave him more attention than Mother.

On cue, it was Father who showed up at the door of the nursery that night, appearing in all his height and a grey kimono hanging over his broad back and triangular shoulders.

"Shuuji, finish your supper and meet me in the garden," he said. "We are going out of town."

Dazai nodded graciously. *Too* graciously. Mother said he looked like a doll; haunted. Dazai was told boys his age rolled in the mud and played baseball, but he'd be beaten if he engaged in such indignity. "Yes, father."

"Take a change of clothes."

"Yes, father."

"You'll like Tokyo, boy."

Oh, he knew he was not going to. He liked Aomori most, with the castle lambent in the sunshine and its walls like shining snow. He loved the harsh coastline. He would hate Tokyo.

Tsugarou, Dazai thought, not without an ounce of bittersweet affection.

Warm tears pressed against the corners of his eyes as the word formed in his mind.
He had no home but that country.

He was fairly sure he would spend his adult life screaming that name in silence, melancholy choking his soundless cries, a grotesque doll-child crying in a paralyzing world he had no place in.

Tsugarou, my home, take me back.

Tsugarou.

Yokohama
Present Day

Dazai liked Tokyo.
He also loved Yokohama, the bay and how he could find space to breathe when the breeze raked through his hair. He liked his worn-out dorm room and the Agency.

That mostly meant he appreciated his fellow detectives and the chemistry they had created through their missions. It took effort, but they resonated.

Still, on days like today — uncommonly good, when the breezy summer sky opened limpid over his head in an expanse of limpid blue, and the workload was bearable and he did not need to empty three cans of beer to function every morning — he always returned to Chuuya's condo with a light spirit and with a light spirit and a tune on his lips.

He had worked hard and earned himself some peace in the quietness of a lush penthouse with way more comforts than his own dorm room.

Plus, he was going home to Sonoko. As the months crawled on, the child's presence was something he had learned to look forward to.

And there would be Chuuya, too.

Chuuya.

The name stole a smirk out of him as he swiped his card, pushed the button to the last floor and patiently waited to be allowed into the elevator that led into the penthouse.

It was going to be a good night. Chuuya would cook, because of *course* the control-freak partner preferred to keep his hands occupied with chopping vegetables after a stressful day at work, and Dazai would read Sonoko a book.
They were halfway through The Little Mermaid, and the child had turned out to have many opinions about the concept that a little mermaid would abandon a whole ass *palace* for a man. Yosano was *delighted* about it.

After her bedtime, Dazai would move to the actually interesting part of his dinner: dessert. He and Chuuya would cuddle while they pretended to watch a movie, the executive uncorking a bottle of red. Then, Dazai would press his partner into the couch and kiss him. Chuuya would sink his fingers in dark curls, guiding him against his mouth, claiming all the kisses Dazai had to give.
They'd kiss until their lips hurt, swollen and glossy.

All day, he'd hoped the evening would come sooner.

As he stepped inside their apartment, his coat still carrying the scent of sunshine and Yokohama's sea breeze after many hours running about, he noticed the silence.

That was odd. Sonoko should have been studying for her schoolwork.
On school days, the kid was always doing her homework after a subordinate of Chuuya's unit collected her from her afternoon classes.
Said lucky subordinate also got to help with homework and to keep an eye on the child until evening, when Double Black finished work.

handwriting was improving fast, but her math remained lacking, so God *knew* she needed the extra help. Dazai imagined she might have fallen asleep over the books.

"I'm home?" Dazai called out as he pushed into the entrance and switched on the lights.
The silence slapped him back, his steps growing cautious. The house seemed empty.

Looking through the rooms took but a short time, searching for any sign of the child while his blood rushed to his temples. It roared in his eardrums. The apartment remained eerily quiet, and Dazai's pulse quickened.

He reached Sonoko's room and pushed the door open gently with his foot, expecting to find the girl fast asleep. But the space was deserted, bed neatly made and backpack and books still missing from the white desk Kouyou had arranged for her.

He fired a message to the Agency's secretary, asking about the child's whereabouts and if anyone had picked her up while he was working. Haruno replied they hadn't seen her.

Next, Dazai called the school. That was the first sensible step, right? It *sounded* reasonable and yet, as he dialed Sonoko's teacher, he realized he had no idea where to start. His mind blanked on what to do, on where to begin looking.
He managed to save the world from the Decay of Angels – and prided himself on doing so with a certain flamboyant nonchalance – yet he couldn't find a child. *Fuck.* And he called himself a detective.

"Ah, Dazai-san, hello," the teacher greeted him. "Sonoko-chan? No, she was fine today. A nice man in a black car came to get her. He had the password you and your partner gave us, so we assumed you had sent him."

The password was a method Chuuya came up with to make sure that Sonoko would only be left in the company of trusted men. Clearly, that plan had a flaw. A big flaw.

Already tuning out of the conversation, Dazai hummed a thank you. He knew for a fact Chuuya had not taken Sonoko either: he would have texted Dazai with the new schedule, and he would have taken the child home for ice cream and anime before her homework.

Chuuya *would* have told him, but the executive was busy with a gang issue that had kept him secluded in one of the Port Mafia safe houses in Sapporo — so, no, something had happened.

Dazai's hands trembled, muscles taut as he tried to suppress his rising anxiety. He repressed the urge to hurl his phone out of the window and dialed Atsushi's number instead, harnessing his unsteady breathing pattern to stifle the panic raging within him.
He had no use for that kind of emotion. Not now. The line rang empty, every obnoxious sound tightening the knot in his guts.

One—

He stopped pacing and sank his toes into the thick fur of the living room rug. He began moving again.

Two—

Why the hell was no one picking up?

Three–

“Dazai-san?”

He almost jumped out of his own skin the second Atsushi picked up the phone. He cleared his voice, hoping his tone would not betray how he’d consumed his shoes marching up and down the room for the last twenty minutes. “Sonoko’s not at school; please tell me Kunikida-kun thought it was funny to give me a heart attack.”

He chirped it out hoping his own words would sound reassuring, yet hearing himself out loud didn’t feel any better. Quite the contrary, in fact.

“She is not here,” Atsushi declared. Then a rustling noise, as if he’d been looking around. “Er, we are in Chiba at the moment. Kunikida-san called us in for a situation.”

He squinted. “So you’re not in town?”

“No, not really. We had a client calling in for a supposed cheating affair, but it’s all solved now — Tanizaki, Ranpo-san, and myself are heading back as we speak. Kunikida-san won’t let me drive, though, said he doesn’t trust me with it.” His voice splintered, and Dazai could picture Atsushi biting his lips as he tried to think about the details of the job and the itinerary. How convenient that half of the Agency had been whisked out of town. “Who was the last person who saw her?”

“Someone went to pick her up after school. They had the password.”

A heartbeat of silence. Then, the faraway sounds of steps; Atsushi running to a car; the wind howling between the device and the boy’s ear. “I’ll get Ranpo-san to call you back.”

Ranpo, yes. Ranpo sounded like the one who would be capable of detangling the mess Dazai created. *You’re not good enough,* a voice hissed in Dazai’s mind.
A treacherous, viper-like voice that whispered that Ranpo was the one everyone turned to when something was *truly* extraordinary. He’d lost the child. Ranpo was going to find her. It was as simple and degrading as that, and despair mixed with *jealousy* – one cold, the other burning; both bubbling in his veins – as he stopped in his tracks and gripped the phone.

Who was he to act on his own, after all? He wasn’t a genius detective. And maybe, *maybe* Ranpo would not have screwed up the mission in the first place.

At this point, he had to consider the possibility that the Agency had been directed away from Yokohama on purpose.

She’s gone. You lost her. You lost her. You lost her.

Running a hand over his forehead, hating how he’d started to sweat, Dazai breathed in. The steps on the other end of the call continued, quicker and louder as if Atsushi was running back to the Agency. He breathed out. “Thanks, Atsushi-kun.”

It was empty, though.

Atsushi's breath crackled over the phone, wind hissing between his cheek and the screen. He must have been in an open area, Dazai mused, likely a parking lot or a park. Maybe he’d

bothered his mentee with his questions, interrupting a job, and that was just another sign of his incapacity. "We'll find her." Atsushi's voice quieted. In that heartbeat of silence, Dazai *heard* him as he took a deep breath. "You can count on that."

He tried to swallow, but a wad of cotton blocked his throat.

"I know," Dazai assured. He forced himself to sound positive, but he was hollowed out inside. "I know we will. We *are* the Armed Detective Agency, after all~"

"Of course."

"Right, right, I'm making a fuss over nothing."

"Dazai-san—!"

"Well," he chirped, "thanks a bunch, Atsushi-kun. Text ya!"

He didn't know whom he was trying to scam with his fake enthusiasm, but it did nothing to ease his anxiety.

As he ended the connection as abruptly as he could, Dazai's mind started flipping through all the worst-case scenarios, feeding him images that made him want to retch. Images that told him the situation was *his* fault. Voices that told him Chuuya would blame him.

He had to limit the executive's involvement until he had a clearer idea of the situation, otherwise Kouyou and Mori — and God knew whoever else, too — would have followed in no time.

Before involving the Port Mafia, Dazai needed a plan.
The voice in his head called him a coward. It hissed at him that he better fix the problem before Chuuya could glimpse at the pitiful depths of Dazai's incompetence. Most importantly, he had to limit Mori's power over the child. The later the Port Mafia knew, the better.

Even if that meant temporarily cutting off *Chuuya.*

The second call required a façade of collectedness; it was business.

Now, Dazai had always prided himself on being a cool-headed person — he *did* grow up in the mafia, after all, where dog ate dog and sedition equaled a bullet in the head. Yet, all those years of danger had not even remotely prepared him for the sandpaper scrape of his tongue wetting his lips – or trying to – as he looked for Ango's number.

His digits found the government contact he had saved for emergencies. He had vowed on Odasaku's grave to never use it, and *yet.* Here he was.

What a sentimental imbecile he was, thinking he could avoid the past forever.

"Sonoko has been kidnapped," Dazai announced as soon as the call connected.

On the other end of the line, Ango inhaled sharply.

“Okay,” he said, dead quiet.

Which, in Ango’s annoying *calm-office-ASMR* tone, meant: *‘keep your cool in front of others, but this is bad’.*
As if Dazai didn’t know it already. His stomach didn’t flutter, though, nor did his world stop turning at the realization that things were bad — it didn’t because Dazai never deluded himself that it could have been a mix-up. People didn’t accidentally pick up the wrong kid.

(Did they? Dazai had *no* idea. He supposed not, though.)

“Someone who knew the passcode to take her from school. Black car, dark clothes; someone who could pass for a Port Mafia mailman. Did anybody from your team pick her up?”

“No, I—“ a pause, and the ticking of a keyboard. “I’ll double-check. Your colleagues know the password, right?”

“The Agency is in Chiba at the moment.”

“Shit.”

That was a new one. Ango barely cussed at all.

“I know.”

“Does Chuuya-san—?”

Dazai’s heart hiccuped. *He’ll hate you. He’ll leave you too, because God knows you disappoint everything and everyone.* “No,” he answered. “He doesn’t know yet. I’ll handle it.”

“I see,” Ango said. Quiet as death.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell Chuuya as soon as I have a plan,” he promised, though he wasn’t sure who he was trying to convince.

“I know.”

“What happened here, Ango?” he asked. “I thought the system you set up was secure.”

“It was supposed to be secure, yes,” Ango said.

“Do you have any information on government-related incidents? Enemies, any leak? My sources didn’t find anything unusual.”

The man’s measured cadence on the other end revealed nothing, and Dazai felt nothing but the way his heart throbbed in his ribs. “Not that I know of— at least, nothing that would target Sonoko especially.”

“She was kidnapped from her parents and farmed in a *lab*,” Dazai hissed. “Her existence alone is enough of a target.”

And Dazai was sure that she, much like Chuuya or Verlaine, had racked up enemies just for the simple crime of being alive. Too many bastards would have gladly made her into an easy source of profit, if not worse. “I was keeping an eye on my informants, but they have gone silent,” he added. At this point, he doubted it was a coincidence. He dedicated most of his old Port Mafia funds to keeping his intel network happy and at his beck and call, but his shift of allegiance hadn’t gone unnoticed.

Ever since he had turned to the Agency, people had started calling the Demon Prodigy weak behind his back. Many of his regular sources weren’t as trustworthy as they used to be. Outbuying mercenaries wasn’t that difficult, either.

“Dazai-kun, the Rainmaker project was classified.”

“The Arahabaki project was supposed to be, too — that didn’t stop a certain pair of French spies, though, did it?”

“And I should remind you the incident at the Osaka laboratory left no survivors.”

“Allegedly*,”* Dazai answered. Sonoko’s words about the Ferris Wheel flashed in his mind, about the doctors and the children. “And I doubt the documentation got destroyed, even if that doesn’t even matter that much. *Atsushi-kun* had a bounty on his head big enough to attract the Guild.”

Even more, that had happened without Beast Beneath the Moonlight being a singularity.

Acquiring a child wielding a mind-reading ability would have been the hit of a lifetime: young enough to be manipulated, hard-wired to be made a weapon. Easy to hide, too.

Now, no one would have ever tried to snatch Sonoko from the hands of Double Black. Risking retaliation from the devastating duo would have been a suicide, but sneaking her out of *school?* Easy. *Ridiculously* easy.

“You call Fitzgerald and ask to access the footage from Eyes of God. I’ll contact Tsujimura. We'll find her,” Ango said, his quiet voice breaking the silence, and Dazai scoffed at that because it sounded naïve.
Fuck’s sake, he thought; Ango was selling him a wish cloaked as a certainty. And Dazai wanted to believe it, he did.

“You know it’s not me you have to worry about,” he answered, quietly.

As he ended the call, Dazai kept his mask firmly in place.

In reality, though, fear churned in his stomach, a thousand moths coming alive with every breath; it filled his lungs and stopped his breathing. Instead of oxygen, he felt like he was inhaling *starch.*

Time stretched on as he continued the string of calls to his informants, calling in all his favors. Hirotsu was next.

Slowly, he slipped the matchbox out of his pants pockets. It rested in his palm, light as a feather and heavy as a stone, and he looked at it and its red and white colors punched back at him. He could almost hear the echo of jazz music in that matchbox and Lupin's illustration.

"A trickster thief."

Remembering how Sonoko's laughter sounded in his ears, his fingers closed around the little matchbox. Would it be fine to revive the Demon Prodigy, just for tonight? Dazai's soul sang for fresh blood.
He wanted revenge; he demanded *pain.* Rivers of crimson flowing through Yokohama.

Not for himself – he'd stopped desiring things for himself a long time ago – but for Sonoko. Sonoko was innocent, and whoever had taken her was not.

He wanted them to bawl and kneel and beg for forgiveness at her feet, and regret they'd ever as much as *considered* touching what had been placed under the care of Double Black.

Was he beyond salvation?

"Forgive me, Odasaku," Dazai said to the silence, lips curling up in a wistful smile as he placed the matchbox in the pocket and headed for the door. "I'm going to go on and do some awful things."

—

Chuuya's day — well, *night* — had been strange from the second he woke up.

He'd spent the last two days in a safe house after being shipped to Sapporo to squash a gang that felt a *little* too cocky for Boss' taste, and was ready to finish off the day quickly and go back home.

He missed Dazai.

God help him, he truly missed the bandaged dimwit and his running mouth.
Most of all, he missed waking up next to his partner.

Still, when he dragged himself out of bed, Chuuya soon realized something was wrong.
An unsettling feeling stirred deep in his abdomen, a stomachache that had nothing to do with the physical status of his body — the few bruises he had gained from fighting the gang had been treated already, and he had been checked for contusions and broken bones.

As he crawled to the bathroom, the executive's patience grew thin with every passing second. It was two in the morning. He'd slept three hours.

He low-key wanted to — ah, Dazai would have laughed, the bastard — die.

Just looking out of the window made him want to bawl. The way he saw it, humans had not been made to work at night and *Chuuya* sure as hell had not been made to wake up at ass o'clock.

He looked miserable, too.
As he brushed his teeth and studied his face in the mirror, taking in his pasty complexion, Chuuya wondered if a snake had made a nest in his belly. He imagined the beast as it got knotted into his guts, becoming one with his flesh.

He had been handed clear orders: wait around for *more* orders, and for a car to take you back to Yokohama. Stay inside the safe house (depressing, but alright). Don't cause drama (as if; he wasn't Dazai).

Not the most entertaining task, but Chuuya had lived through worse.

As his morning stretched on — lazily, his movements more sluggish than he liked to admit — Chuuya kept on finding short dark hair trapped in his pajamas and his cashmere sweater and in his brush.
He tried to text his partner (mostly to lovingly threaten the dipshit to go to sleep) but had no signal.
Stupid safe house, he supposed.

Still, the eerie feeling swelled and festered in his chest as the executive made himself an early breakfast. Or, well, a *very* late dinner.

But the unsettling feeling didn't fade with the hours, turning more nagging with every second he spent in the empty house waiting for further orders.

He felt *sidelined*.

Until Kouyou called the safe house's emergency line.

It happened around five in the morning, when Chuuya was exercising in the living room out of sheer boredom.

"Boss called in an executive meeting," she told him, "*it's critical.* "

Chuuya stared at the phone for longer than he cared to admit. An executive meeting? That was weird. That kind of reunion among the upper brass got called in only once every year or under dire circumstances.

In the entirety of Chuuya's life, extraordinary meetings had only been forced upon the executive board during the Dragon Head conflict.

Then, Dazai showed up after four years of hiding. He had triggered a higher-up meeting with his threatening letter in the farfetched case the Port Mafia decided to get rid of him and his big mouth.

Dazai—

Chuuya halted, realization clicking in his brain. His jaw dropped.

"*Son of a bitch,"* he spat.

How could he miss it? How dare the soulmatism stop *soulmating* the second Chuuya needed to read his partner's mind? They weren't telepaths, as far as Chuuya knew, but surely it felt like it on most days.

Just like that, as his body glowed red, Chuuya recognized the trick. It was so clear. It was so obvious, once Chuuya noticed it, that he couldn't explain how he had missed it at all.

It looked like he was going to fly all the way back to Yokohama, after all.

—

Back at the Agency, Dazai had his own demons to fight.

He was, and would always be, nothing but a carcass. He had been chewed and mauled and sucked to the bone, consumed until nothing was left of him.
He had put himself through the meat grinder, either out of fun or out of necessity.

The piece of minced meat that used to be his body was missing blends of muscles, and there wasn't a single bone that had not been dried out of blood. When he was in the mafia, he was chewed on — bad thoughts stole ravenous bites at his flesh, and ripped through him every day.

But, while with Chuuya and Sonoko, Dazai had discovered something new. He felt like a whole person in his partner's company. The thought of losing that terrified him.

"Dazai," Kunikida's voice almost made him flinch. It reminded him he was sitting at his desk, surrounded by documents he had not touched. "I've prepared the meeting room. What do we do now?"

"We wait," Dazai murmured, eyes glued to the dark surface of the table as he nursed a piping hot mug of tea. "Atsushi-kun and Ranpo should be back soon. I have a pretty good idea of what happened, but we need a plan before anyone else gets involved. The Port Mafia has a certain way of doing things. Civilian baits, sacrifices— whatever they do, it'll come with a price." He cupped his mug with both hands, trying to find comfort in the warmth. His fingers were cold and rigid, his nerves tensed like strings on the point of snapping.

From the desk in front of him, Tanizaki leaned in and glanced at Kunikida, eyes turning narrow. "Do you both think the Port Mafia will try to interfere?"

"That would be the next logical step. It was always supposed to be a joint mission," Kunikida answered.

Chuuya will be worried, Dazai thought. The idea made him nauseous.

"Wouldn't it be good to exploit the Port Mafia's resources?" Tanizaki asked.

“I would guess their help always comes with an extra price. Is that not right, Dazai?”

“The less Mori-san is involved, the calmer I’ll be.” *Liar,* a voice hissed in his brain, *you’re not calm. You’re terrified.* “The same goes for the executives. I can’t predict how this assignment will change our connection to the Port Mafia and the debt we already owe them — if I have to make an educated guess, neither can Ranpo,” he said, casting a glance at the empty desk next to the window. The detective and Atsushi had gone out to look for clues, and Dazai was left drowning in this sense of static immobility. “That’s why I was so against it in the first place.”

“I thought it was because of the Gravity Manipulator,” Kunikida said. The implication sank deep in Dazai’s bones; it was comical, almost, how everyone knew just how easily Chuuya got under his skin. Chuuya always *got* to him.

“Chuuya is part of it, but this entire operation was a gamble from the start.”

“Is this why you’re avoiding Nakahara?”

Dazai’s heart slammed against his bones. “I can’t risk losing him,” he admitted, and his voice was cold but his skin felt feverish, and his hands shivered against the mug.

“Dazai…” Kunikida called, voice trailing off into an exhale.

The man patted his shoulder, and the weight of his hand felt oddly comforting. Dazai sagged against the touch. His own coldness radiated to the mug. He corrupted everything he touched.

“I bought us some hours, give or take, but Chuuya is most certainly on his way,” he declared. “And we’ll need to gear up because he will be *pissed;* if we’re lucky, he’s going to be mostly pissed at me for manipulating him. Worst case scenario, he’s going to destroy the Agency and ask his questions after.” His chest deflated at the idea. That kind of violent retaliation didn’t sound like something Mori-san would have endorsed, especially with a truce in place, but he didn’t want to assume. Chuuya was only human and could go rogue, given enough of a push. No one wanted to find out what that looked like. “We lost all ways to confirm Chuuya’s humanity when he was younger, right before he activated the unhinged form of his special ability for the first time. I was the one to tell him that — that activating Corruption would erase the data of his experiments.”

“He’s like Sonoko-chan?” Tanizaki whispered, and Dazai interrupted him with a nod.

“Not that Chuuya would ever admit this to anyone.”

It was Kunikida who grimaced, then, and Dazai could not point his finger to what emotion had flashed through his partner’s face. Was it disappointment, was it suspect? Maybe it was anger.

“Then why are you telling us?”

“Because then you can understand what’s at stake here,” he answered. “Back then, I told him to take two minutes to think it over. The little show-off, though… He didn’t even waste three seconds.”

God, Dazai thought, the memory catching up with him like a worn-out nightmare.

At the time, Chuuya didn’t think at all. He had thrown himself at a supernatural monster to save the city — giving up a piece of himself in the process.

And it was brave, and it was beautiful and commendable and sad at the same time. Above all, like many things about Chuuya, it was *pure.*

“Does that mean that Nakahara-san is not human?” Tanizaki’s voice came out thin.

“I believe he is. Proving it is another matter entirely, I’m afraid.” He sighed, running a hand through his hair, his dark curls damp with sweat in the boiling summer weather. The heatwave had begun to hit, descending through Yokohama like a lid on a steamer. Conveniently, the Agency also lacked an A/C system, as if Dazai’s death wish wasn’t already strong enough. “But taking care of someone has always been that hat rack’s way of proving to himself that he’s human. Such a stupid quest. He lost so much already, he should know when to give up.”

I won’t let him lose this, too.

The fact that they had managed to create a family with Sonoko’s life was proof — *their* proof – that they could be more than kids of the mafia.

They were more than experiments, more than murderers. Her existence represented the proof beyond doubt that Chuuya’s tweaked DNA was human enough to desire a family. It was confirmation that he was human, and painfully so. Under the demon prodigy and the singularity, stripped bare, they were just people.

Just a house of damaged individuals that society had tossed aside.

“Sonoko-chan is fine,” Tanizaki argued, tone strained but firm. For a moment, Dazai thought that the younger man would reach out and hold his hand; he would not have backed off. “Ranpo-san said so, and Naomi-chan is out looking for her as well.”

“You’re not alone,” Kunikida agreed. Warmth bloomed in Dazai’s chest.

“We’ll find her, Dazai-san.”

“Ango and government aside, I need to find her,” he murmured. “Because that’s what we do at the Detective Agency.”

He stared into the dark surface of his now lukewarm tea.

He saw his reflection staring back at him, cheeks sunken before time and eyes helpless, disheveled in everything. *Because he’s coming for me and, if I don’t solve this quickly enough, I might lose him too.*

Soon after, the door slammed open.

—

An hour before, Chuuya had barged into the Detective Agency's office, practically swinging the door out of its hinges. A secretary with brown hair and round glasses had almost jumped out of her skin as he let himself in.

Chuuya had ignored her and stalked right into the main meeting room of the office — where he found, as he feared, half of the main body of the organization. Dazai, Atsushi, Yosano. Kunikida, writing on a whiteboard.
He zeroed in on Sonoko's picture pinned to the board between pieces of paper and scraps of pictures and website print-outs, and his stomach twisted. He'd plummeted on a chair uninvited, sitting across from the rest of the Agency.

Now Dazai looked at him from the other side of the table, gaze half-lidded and sharp, his face bare save for the icy resolve to kill.

Dark irises studied Chuuya as if he was gauging his anger and figuring out how to use it from where Dazai was tucked in, between Atsushi and Kunikida.

The colors of the Armed Detective Agency — the soft azure of his shirt, bandages peeking out from his rolled-up sleeves, clashed with the hollowness of his eyes. Chuuya remembered that honed expression from a lifetime of darkness, and realized that he had not missed it. It had been a minute since he'd seen his old partner resurface, shedding the empty shell of Dazai Osamu of the Agency. Now, as he looked at him, he could barely recognize the man he'd left with Sonoko just that morning.

"Chuuya," Dazai said, dragging out the sound of his name into a rounded, laconic drawl. "I thought you had an executive meeting to attend."

"You can't trigger executive meetings to keep me occupied, you dipshit. I know how your brain works."

The man shrugged the accusation away. "Glad you made it," he only said.

"You knew I'd notice."

"Of course, I knew you'd notice," Dazai tilted his head to the side, "you were ten minutes late, though."

In response, Chuuya's hands twitched and his nails sank into the table. If he weren't wearing gloves, he would have left trails etched into the surface.

Go figure how the man could input a high security, upper-ranks meeting without being on the executive board, according to his whims. The fact that he could do so from another organization made Chuuya want to hurl the entire table out of the window.

The sheer, unpunished *audacity.*
Dazai might have had Mori in a chokehold, but Chuuya was different. He also knew Dazai

enough to know that the man would have died before admitting he was not in complete control of a situation, so he gave him a pass for being a roundabout asshole. He trusted Dazai. He trusted his ways and his plans.

So he took a deep breath and plummeted onto the chair next to Yosano, placing his hat on the table. He prepared himself for a long conversation, himself against the most manipulative man on God's green earth and his infuriating detective colleagues. He hated it already.

"Fill me in on what happened," Chuuya ordered, so very slowly. "From the top."

Dazai bit his bottom lip and glanced at the whiteboard. He was unsteady, Chuuya could read his body language like a book. He sensed the self-loathing bubble under Dazai's picture-perfect façade of calm. It was tainted with anger.

But Chuuya didn't need him to be angry. Later, sure. Now he needed intel.

"We were in Chiba when Dazai-san called us," Atsushi started. His voice was trembling, but Chuuya banged a fist on the table.

"Not you, Jinko. *Dazai."*

Kunikida frowned. "I would appreciate it if you didn't snap the table in two."

"And I would appreciate some fucking collaboration, here," he barked back. Nonetheless, he relaxed against the chair and retreated his hands into his pockets to avoid breaking the table in two. He would have if he could. One more wrong word from Dazai, and there would be no saving the furniture. "Or shall I remind you that this is a joint mission? Piss me off enough, and it will be taken as an act of war."

"Chuuya," Dazai warned him. He was so *fucking* worried, and that freaked Chuuya out too.

"Where. The fuck. Is. Our. Child?"

He could sense the sudden shift in the air — how it grew thick with tension at the choice of words. He didn't blame them. Dazai squinted, not escaping Chuuya's glare. "Ranpo is figuring out her location as we speak."

"Give me something I can work with, then. A rough estimate. How long will it take?"

"That is not a question I can answer, I'm afraid," Dazai replied, deadpan. "And Ranpo-san works better alone."

Chuuya clicked his tongue. Annoyance was painted all over his frown, in the deep fine lines around his squinting eyes. "Tell me what the fuck happened from the beginning, Osamu — or so help me God, I will pulverize your stupid skull."

Dazai obeyed. For once, he did so without backtracking. Chuuya didn't know why, especially since he'd just abused first name privileges, but it worked nonetheless.

The issue was, there was really not much to say at all: Sonoko had disappeared. Somehow the password had leaked, and someone had perfectly replicated a Port Mafia uniform and car. The last person to pull off something like that was the King Of Assassins. There wasn't much of a lead at all: in fact, it barely made a case.

But it would be enough to find her, Chuuya told himself.

It *had* to be enough.

—

The room was bathed in a stark light, the bulb dangling over their heads casting long shadows over the table in the Agency's secondary meeting room. Sonoko's picture stared at them from the whiteboard, and Dazai had to keep himself from standing up and clawing at it, tearing it away from the wall.

He and Chuuya sat across from each other, their shoulders tout as they stared at a map of the city that Kunikida had left unraveled on the table before taking the rest of the Agency to the cafè downstairs. It was done to give Double Black some *privacy, and* some space to come up with a plan. Which might very easily turn into 'giving Double Black some space to fight and kill each other once and for all' but Chuuya had promised to not pulverize the building. Dazai had thanked Kunikida with a hissing whisper, and the man had patted his shoulder and asked him if he needed backup.

'No,' he said, '*I've got it.* '

It wasn't that he didn't trust Kunikida, but it felt too personal to let anyone into the fight. It was between himself and his past. Between himself and the ghost of his family who had never, not *once,* raised a finger to help him while he was sold to nullify the Abilities of grown-ups he didn't know.

He always felt like he had to save himself on his own, but Sonoko would never know that kind of fear.

Chuuya's leg bounced anxiously beneath the table, the rhythmic tapping of his foot betraying his unease. Anxiety oozed off of him.

"Stop that," Dazai said, voice thick and his fingers still interlaced before his nose, lips pressed against his bitten fingers. "You're making me nervous."

Chuuya's snarl was edged with frustration. "Sorry if I can't control my damn body right now."

"Acting twitchy won't help us get her back."

Chuuya looked like he wanted to smack him, and Dazai found that he was folding under the sudden pressure. He feigned calm and glanced at the board instead. With Sonoko's safety at stake, they had no room for distractions, even for those that were the result of jarred nerves and frayed emotions.

"Then put that stupid detective into work."

“I did.”

Chuuya glared at the map. “Assholes,” he growled. “I swear to *fucking* god they will die screaming.”

Dazai stared at him. “They will,” he agreed. He feared that the way his partner had latched onto the idea of a family would backfire, eventually. Mori would find a way to exploit it.

Because Nakahara Chuuya would never have a child, a family, or even a real brother. He didn’t even have a birthday or a real surname.

For the first time in several weeks, Dazai reminded himself they had been crammed together to *work,* not to play house and pretend they were a couple working in a spy movie. In that second, he realized how similar Chuuya looked to Verlaine in his desperate quest for a scrap of humanity. A family. He wanted to hug him, to comfort him.

Too bad he’d never been too good with feelings.

“Chuuya,” he said and took a breath. Chuuya’s leg didn’t stop. “I know it might not amount to much, but I know how you feel. I care about her too.”

“Then *act* like it.”

“I am.”

“You’re scared,” Chuuya declared, and Dazai’s breath caught. He’d loathed this moment. “You don’t have to hide your fear. Not from me. And I get it. I get that you never want to involve Boss if you can help it, I get that you have your plans, I *get* that you don’t trust my organization, but—” *but you have always trusted me. “* —But admitting that you are a fucking person for once won’t kill you, because you’re giving me the fuckin’ creeps.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

A single wrinkle cut Chuuya’s brow. His partner saw him and he read him like an open book, and for once Dazai wasn’t sure he wanted to know the words Chuuya would find between the lines of his soul. “You think this is your fault,” Chuuya declared.

Isn’t it, though? Dazai wondered. *Don’t you blame me for what happened? Because I do. I do blame myself.*

Instead, he offered him a smirk cut in glass. “Ah, Chuuya’s gone insane and is not making sense.”

“For the record, I don’t hate you for being the one who found out the kiddo was missing.”

“H’m. You’re speculating.”

“You act like it’s all your plan, but you’re scared as fuck. I *see* you.”

“And I wish I could see Chuuya, but I forgot a microscope~”

Chuuya's punch collided with the wall before Dazai could stop him, opening a crater in the paint and concrete the second his knuckles touched it. Dust flew all over, the air from the collision sweeping through Dazai's hair and tousling his curls. "Stop fuckin' around."

"*Fantastic."* He made a big show of sighing and rubbing his temples, shoulders hunching. "Jesus Christ, Slug. You're right, okay? But I'd appreciate it if you didn't destroy my workplace," Dazai glanced at the map, tone bone-dry. "I assume you have intel too."

Chuuya nodded. He glanced at the wall too, lips crumpling as he slipped his hands into his pockets. Dazai already knew from that gesture alone that Mori Corp was going to send a generous chèque and a renovation plan.

"So— while your fish ass was scheming, some of my informants have come back. It seems like a terrorist branch from Kansai — armed ability users with a Gifted leader — might have taken her to an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of the city. With security companies and former doctors being in cahoots with criminal organizations, it's not unthinkable they knew about Sonoko's experiments. And check this out—" Chuuya walked to the whiteboard and tapped a knuckle against the map. "They are based in Osaka."

"So you think someone from the lab might have survived and leaked the intel on Sonoko?"

"We certainly aren't the only ones who know about the experiments, that's for sure. I suspect Fitzgerald will confirm the black market lead at any point now."

Dazai's eyes narrowed as he processed the information. "He did. Ranpo-san mentioned a terrorist cell."

"They are most likely going to sell the child — preferably alive, at this point. One would want to *use* a singularity, not kill it."

"You sure?"

Chuuya's eyes shone. Mad blue. "It's what I'd do with myself."

"Let's move," Dazai answered, kicking back his chair as he stood. He couldn't afford to heed his heart, which was breaking at Chuuya's words – the '*no one will ever touch you'* and the '*you deserved a better childhood, a better life'*. They all did. It wasn't going to change their past. "We can discuss a strategy on the way."

As he glanced once more at the map, Chuuya didn't even try to ask about the Agency and its involvement. Dazai didn't offer any explanation either. "We're going to make it quick," he carried on, gesturing to the door. "Let's head to the docks first. It's the most likely place they'd take her."

Chuuya arched an eyebrow. "Port Mafia territory?"

"That's what Ranpo said, and he has the annoying tendency to always be right."

"That's fucking suicide."

“Not if they are well prepared, or if they are expecting a cargo ship to come soon— that’s the best trading spot in the city, especially for the black market.”

After a second of silence, Chuuya agreed with a bob of his head.

He stepped toward the exit first and Dazai followed, placing one foot after the next to exorcise the uneasiness in his stomach. The door creaked open and the humid air swept in, cutting Dazai’s breath short. He took a deep inhale, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

When he plucked the phone from his pocket, it was out of courtesy to an old friend who had helped him out so far.

To: Ago
> Hiya, Ango~
> Chuuya and I will save Sonoko-chan. You have 20 minutes to evacuate the port area. Don’t try to stop us.
> That’s all the heads-up we’ll give.

If they were lucky, the Government could help with the cover-up and securing any prisoners in the terrorist cell. In every other scenario, it would avoid civilian casualties — deaths Dazai could not bring himself to care about, now, but that would no doubt all burden his conscience later. Odasaku would have wanted him to care. It had taken him a while, but Dazai now suspected that Odasaku had wanted him to be *empathetic,* not a paladin.

"We'll need a car,” Dazai announced as they headed down the stairs. “Kunikida-kun’s should do.”

“Is he gonna be okay with it?”

“I’m sure he will be *enraged* when he finds out.”

“Ya know, we can always get my bike.”

“Oh, sure, let me willingly hop on a tricycle that might kill me painfully,” Dazai echoed, rolling his eyes. Kill him now. “I’d rather see tomorrow, thank you.”

Chuuya shook his head, but let the matter go with little fuss. “I’m driving,” he only declared.

Dazai wasn’t sure *where* he found the strength to smile and joke around and pretend he was not dying inside at the idea of fighting for Sonoko’s life — to uphold Soukoku’s *reputation*. And part of him was preparing himself.

Despite the summer heat, a bone-deep chilliness pervaded him as he fell into step with Chuuya, close but never quite touching each other.

—

It was a carcass of a warehouse.

The skeleton of what used to be a building in a desolate expanse of concrete. The laminated walls and ruined bricks laughed at them, a less fortunate twin building to the moldy warehouses at the port overlooking the still, murky water. Half of the second floor had been ripped open by a hole. A relentless wind whipped through the open space, tousling Chuuya's hair as they approached the structure. His hat would have flown away if not for Tainted. He breathed in the scent of battle looming in the air.

The sky was overcast, a heavy blanket of clouds that seemed to mirror the weight of their mission.

Dazai watched Chuuya touch his hat with one hand, throwing a glance in his direction as they proceeded. There never needed words. Their partnership was a well-oiled machine, each understanding the other's unspoken cues, and Dazai understood the situation well enough: one more lie, and he was dead.
One fuck-up, and they were *both* dead.

A sly grin tugged at the corners of Dazai's lips as they entered the warehouse. "This sure brings back memories," he said. "How was that? 'Dazai Osamu and his slug-shaped dog save the day'."

Chuuya rolled his eyes. "Oh, please. Ya can stay here and get something to drink while I finish up the job and save the kiddo."

"That'd be boring. What am I supposed to do in the meantime?"

"Go play hopscotch on a minefield or something."

"Tempting, but no thanks. You're only trying to be Sonoko's favorite."

"Wrong," Chuuya said. "I am her favorite."

Dazai welcomed their banter, as it was a comforting tradition to keep in the face of danger. If he had to die, he would rather do so laughing.

As they moved deeper into the cavernous warehouse, the echoes of their footsteps resonated through the seemingly abandoned structure. The high ceiling space bore the hallmarks of years of neglect, with rusted beams and ruined wooden planks hovering over them like a sleeping giant. The place looked like it was about to fall apart, the exposed pipework croaking and whistling.

The air was heavy with the unmistakable scent of salt, a lingering reminder of the warehouse's proximity to the sea. It clung to Dazai's nostrils. After he managed to locate the power generator – incredible how often people forgot about that detail, in movies – they had managed to turn on the lights in the structure. Most didn't work, but some *did.* Fighting with some light was better than fighting in the pitch, thick darkness.

Their path through the space was brightened by thin streaks of creaking lights and a shy moonlight that managed to seep in through gaps in the dilapidated structure. Each step was deliberate, their senses were on high alert, ready for whatever challenges lay ahead. Then,

Chuuya stopped. He lifted his head to face the empty room, hands firmly placed in his jacket's pockets. He looked relaxed as if he was walking into a brunch date.

"Yo," he called to the empty room. His voice echoed in the deserted space. "Whoever the fuck you are, wanna come out while I'm feeling nice?"

With a snort, Dazai shook his head. "Oh, my."

"What are ya laughing at, jackass?" Chuuya grimaced in his direction. "It works."

"Sure, sur–"

A gunshot interrupted him, the whistling of a bullet hissing just past his right ear. *Well,* throw him in a cell with Fyodor and call it a sleepover: it *did* work.

Just as Dazai faced the space and squinted to assess the situation, a door creaked open and a man clad in a bulletproof jacket emerged. In his hand, he brandished a semi-automatic pistol. The same annoying gun that almost got them, Dazai supposed. Good thing the bastard had a terrible aim.

The mercenary was bald, his traits western. His head reflected the faint light that penetrated the dilapidated warehouse. He wore dark sunglasses that obscured his eyes, which was a pretty stupid decision at night, if one asked Dazai. Those glasses looked almost as stupid as the misplaced weapon in his hands as the man aimed at Chuuya, unaware of how pointless that was going to be.
Good luck getting Chuuya with a firearm. Good luck getting Chuuya at all, actually.

The man's grip on the weapon was tight. The dull steel of the gun contrasted with the fierce amusement on Chuuya's face.

Dazai's heart slowed down for a moment. He focused, sensing the shift in his partner. When the mercenary shot at them again, Dazai didn't even move. Before the man could aim, Chuuya's instincts kicked into high gear.
With lightning speed the executive dropped low, ducking beneath the threat of the firearm, his grin unyielding and a low, feral noise rolling out of his lips.

"Oi, Dazai."

An arched eyebrow. *Oh,* Dazai thought; *So the party has already started.* "H'm?"

"Play some music, will ya?"

Before he could answer, Chuuya was already in motion. He sounded like a feral beast and Dazai's blood sang.

That was the man he'd fallen in love with — the murdering machine, the bastard, the king. The Gravity Manipulator. And, God, Dazai had missed this sight of absolute power. Gracefulness in murder.

That sick, cocky attitude awakened a thousand butterflies in Dazai's stomach.

Without hesitation, Chuuya propelled himself forward, a blur of red hair and motion lines as he closed the distance between himself and the armed soldier. Not that a common sniper stood any chance of winning against Chuuya. The scene played out like a sequence from an action movie — only Dazai had seen better fights and way less boring defeats. It wasn't even *fun.*

Chuuya's movements were fluid, his wolfish grin stretching as he dashed the man and faced the gun that the soldier pointed at him. His chest met the barrel of the weapon like a long-lost friend. "Yo," he greeted, and the man's body folded like wet paper – only *then* Chuuya's lips twitched up. He kicked the man in the sternum, a gleam of red light so fast the man didn't even see him coming. He couldn't even raise his arm to protect himself, and the fight was done before it started.

And, in all that, Chuuya didn't bother slipping his hands out of his pockets.

"Ha. Easy," Chuuya hummed, feet gracefully hitting the ground with the victorious *clack* of his heel. His coat floated around him and Dazai forced himself to swallow.
Beautiful, he thought — just as mesmerized as when they were just teenagers working together. Just as choked up by love as he was when they were fifteen.

"Oi, Mackerel, ya done drooling?"

Dazai gulped. He couldn't find anything to say, though, tongue brittle as he stared at Chuuya walking away. "Huh," he said.

With a pout, Chuuya tilted his head in his direction. "The fuck's happening with you? You coming?"

It all happened in a second – surprise opened his eyes, and embarrassment dusted over his cheeks, and Dazai found that he could barely muster a crooked grin. It was the fakest smile he'd ever accomplished but he'd make it work. "On second thought, I can let Chuuya do all the work."

"HA?"

He considered complaining about Chuuya's crass methods of calling out the enemies, but then he'd have to admit that Chuuya had actually defeated one while he slacked off, so he shut himself up and followed the executive.

As they ventured deeper into the darkness of the warehouse, Chuuya's Tainted casting red shadows and painting the walls crimson, Dazai couldn't help but feel oddly at ease – like a leaf floating downstream, carried by the current of his partner's breathing pattern and steady heartbeat. He knew everything about the man walking next to him. He considered reaching out, holding him. They could waltz in battle, holding one another's fingers, holding each other's hearts in their hands.

It felt like time had never passed. Like they were still *them.*

Seven years of fated bond, and counting. Oh, how wrong Fyodor had been, back at Meursault.

Nothing about it was shallow.

As it turned out, Chuuya didn't need to shout anymore to encourage their enemies to step forward: the rest of the terrorist cell was waiting for them in the warehouse's belly, lined up in the control room. They waited for them holding heavy guns that would have been enough to fight off a platoon.
Dazai could almost have *blushed.* So much effort for them. It was almost flattering.

He strolled into the room with his hands cushioning his head, humming a suicide song, mustering the air of somebody who was unfazed by the potentially dangerous surroundings. Who cared if he died anyway, right? As if Chuuya would have let him die. His stupid guard dog would have *never* let him off that easily. Besides, he had Chuuya by his side. A 5' 3" one-man platoon with a mama bear attitude and a very short fuse, too.

Their footsteps reverberated through the space, as did the clack of the weapons being raised as soon as they stepped inside. A wall of venomous serpents, ready to bite; and too bad Dazai didn't fear snakes, he never did.

Chuuya's lips stretched up, a joyless smile lighting up his blue irises.

"Would you look at that? We walked into a party."

Dazai hummed. "Looks like a terrible party to me."

It wasn't a joke at all, yet Chuuya exploded in a hollow, howling laughter. "You're always rude as fuck, aren't ya?"

And then it started *raining.* A shower of bullets — *ra ta ta ta ta ta ta ta*, echoing in Dazai's marrow, violating his eardrums, a sound that came to him familiar and foreign at the same time. If one lives long enough, it is possible to learn that every weapon has its own distinguished voice.

All Dazai knew was that a relentless storm of bullets rained down on them, their sharp reports echoing through the warehouse like a thunderclap. The metallic cascade was a furious tempest, a barrage of lead and death, seeking to consume everything in its path.

In the face of the onslaught, Dazai moved back into the shadow, retreating like the tide until he made himself invisible. He shifted to the side and slipped away, his silhouette melting into the darkness as he left Chuuya on the stage.

His hand found the handle of his gun, just in case.
But he knew this was Chuuya's piece. This was his partner's little solo moment, not a pas-a-deux — that would come later, the closing number of a job that had pissed him off from the very beginning. But they would not drag this dance out, not when they knew all the steps by heart already. All Dazai had to do for now was cover for his partner and monitor the escape routes.

Chuuya’s body gleamed red. The tempest of bullets washed over him, unable to find its mark or ever reach the executive. His body — solid shoulders, legs slightly parted, coat waving behind him — reminded Dazai of a steadfast anchor amid the storm, ready to face an entire room of weapons alone and head-on. His strategic retreat had allowed the *tank* half of Double Black to take charge, handling the imminent threat with a grin that put fire to shame.

(How *hot* could Chuuya be? Frankly, Dazai was not even ashamed at this point.)

The bullets fell to the ground with a clicking sound, the clippers emptying quickly. Chuuya's response was swift and decisive. Most of all, it was practically invisible. He didn’t even bother taking his hands out of his pockets.

“Oi, y’all done?” he asked, almost bored, looking around as the weapons fell silent and the room grew quiet. The gunmen tried to reload, but it was too late.

For the Tainted Sorrow opened like a scarlet halo around the executive. The walls, the *building* itself, roared with an earthquake. Chuuya played with gravity with confident ease — a child manipulating dough, twisting it to his desire — and the surrounding air seemed to ripple as he directed the force, and the very ground trembled beneath their feet. The pressure rose and rose, and *rose.* Dazai looked as the heavy breathing stopped, and the soldiers died in utter silence.
For a moment, the bodies floated inches above the floor, their feet kicking into their air as they left the floor. Then, the weight of gravity came down on them like the wrath of an invisible god, the building’s floor shaking under Chuuya’s might. It *crushed.* It *smashed.*

A powerful tidal wave crashed upon their adversaries, smashing them into the floor. Bones cracked. The wet sound of ripped flesh filled the room.

Dazai knew their enemies were dead in a matter of seconds, their internal organs beaten to a pulp and unable to escape the chains of gravity. The invisible force crushed their weapons and reduced their bones to a mash. It had never been a fair fight.

Untouched — a spectator among spectators, only him and his old pal Death — Dazai watched in silent awe as Chuuya's powers surged to life, like a tempest brewing on the horizon, and then came down. An inhale and an exhale.

He marveled at the poetic beauty of his partner’s strength. Chuuya was too impatient to worry about finesse, and Dazai wanted nothing but to kiss him and taste power on his tongue. Moreover, Chuuya didn’t look like he’d just killed ten people. Dazai didn’t feel like questioning himself on the immorality of their actions, either.

They looked at each other and said nothing.

As they strolled onwards and to a set of stairs, leaving behind the carnage of the firefight, the floor bore witness to the aftermath of Chuuya’s passage. Ten distinct, human-shaped holes were etched into the floor, carved in the hubris of ten foolish humans who had tried to stop gravity.

Chuuya didn't look back at the people he had murdered. Dazai didn't either. It wasn't personal.

Amidst them, one particular corpse caught Dazai's eye. His gaze stopped on a white jumper, its pattern barely visible behind a black padded bulletproof vest. The ribcage and face had been completely crushed, bones bent inward like a sickening, makeshift basin.

The corpse was once a woman. She wore a jumper with a Ferris Wheel knitted in pastel colors.

—

Dazai felt Sonoko's presence before he saw her.

They'd just entered an open, wind-swept room on the second floor. A hole opened in place of the right-end wall, leaving bare the iron structure of the warehouse.

And in the desolation, the summer's humidity and piercing saltwind slapping against his face, Dazai's breath hitched as he noticed a man holding a child. A man in a black hoodie and glass-white eyes stared at them, his lean frame standing in the middle of the space with a bulletproof vest strapped to his chest. Whatever the hell was his Ability, Dazai supposed it wasn't one for self-defense.

In his arms, the man held Sonoko. *There,* Dazai thought. That signaled exactly where his empathy for the pale-eyed ability user ended. She opened her mouth but not a sound came out, and Dazai's heart ached.

Thanks to her ability, she could feel it all: the horror, the violence, the death. She had been soaked in grief and left to marinate.

"Shit," Chuuya hissed behind him.

Frankly, he sympathized. *Shit indeed.*

With his stomach twisted into knots, Dazai's eyes darted to Chuuya, silently seeking his partner's input on the mastermind.
The other shook his head, hat tilting with the gesture, his eyes ablaze with a hatred that left no space for mercy. His eyes shone like dead stars.
Let's rip him apart, Chuuya's silence said, *and let's make sure it hurts*.

Dazai's heart raced as his hand went for the gun again. Subtly.

"Welcome, Double Black, to my humble headquarters," the man welcomed them, one arm spreading like a wing as the other held onto Sonoko. Dazai's heart pounded as he took in the heavily accented voice; the mastermind moved gracefully and looked them in the eye, but he didn't seem that powerful. And yet, neither did they. "Thank you for coming to die."

Chuuya's eyebrows disappeared behind his fringe. "*Tch.* "

"You heard him, Slug?"

“Guy’s pretty cocky for a cockroach, right?”

“Gravity Manipulator – and the Demon Prodigy, of course,” the mastermind said, ignoring their commentary. His voice quivered, fervent, like he was reciting a presentation he had rehearsed – too bad Dazai didn’t like *fanboys*. Especially psycho ones who stole what belonged to him. “Your reputation precedes you.”

Chuuya bared his canines. “How nice. Too bad it will be the last fuckin’ thing you hear.”

“Is that so?”

“Give us the child, and we’ll let you live . ”

“Now, Nakahara-san, this kind of animosity just won’t do,” the man countered, quietly stepping up and down while adjusting Sonoko in his grip. She must have been instructed not to talk. She was soaking up his anger. “You of all people should know how much an experiment is worth; if one finds the right buyer, that is.”

Dazai frowned.

His skin sizzled, his senses picking up a level of threat beneath the hooded figure's words. No one lucid would have challenged them so carelessly — no one that was anything but powerful. Well. Powerful or stupid, that was.

As Chuuya focused on the enemy, Dazai assessed the situation. The escape routes, the wrecked wall behind the man. The breeze howling in. However, it was Chuuya's nervous energy that really caught his attention.

One didn’t get to witness Nakahara Chuuya furious every day.

Slowly, he slipped closer to Chuuya. "Do not use Corruption," he murmured, a warning meant for Chuuya's ears alone. "Sonoko will *feel* it."

“Fat chance.” Chuuya's response came as a growl. “I won't bother with Corruption because I want to see this goddamn bastard suffer. And I want to be *awake* when it happens.”

Dazai supposed it was a fair point. He understood Chuuya’s need to bathe in the blood of the man who masterminded Sonoko’s kidnapping. He was thirsty for revenge, too. As Dazai braced himself for a fight, his fingertips featherlight against the gun’s handle, the Ability User let out a chuckle. “Why so cautious, Double Black? Come on, fight me. Or are you worried I might drop your little weapon and ruin it?” His inhuman eyes, transparent as water, bright as sin, shone. “Do you have any idea of the value of this singularity in the black market? This little thing, so helpless, so—” He lifted a hand as if to brush Sonoko’s hair. Chuuya seethed, baring his teeth and hissing like a beast. “—valuable.”

“Don’t touch her,” Dazai heard himself rumble. It sounded far away, but the Ability User smiled.

“Why? She belongs to me. I can do whatever I please with her. But you must know how many people will pay for it — starting with those laboratory dogs who pointed me right to

her.” He clicked his tongue. “You met Dr. Akashi, yes?”

Dazai’s lips retreated into a thin, sterile line. “She’s dead.”

“Is she? That’s a pity. She had connections that would pay well.”

“Son of a *bitch,”* Chuuya growled.

“We could have split the profit, you and me,” the man sing-songed. “Too bad Double Black seems to be too *soft* for that.”

The black market. Dazai allowed himself a joyless smile; *so that was the predictability of human greed, wasn’t it?* “Ah, jeez. You should be ashamed of yourself, you know? A grown man who makes a child cry,” he said. His leveled voice dipped.

“You have no room to talk, Demon Prodigy,” the Gifted drawled, excitement making his voice high-pitched. His laugh echoed in the abandoned building. “Becoming so weak, so pit —“

Bang.

The man couldn’t finish.

The bullet hit him in the knee, forcing him to tumble down. He fell on one leg first, then the other half of his body was dragged down. As the assailant's knees buckled and he crumpled to the ground, Dazai couldn't help the sense of vindication that slipped into his muscles, nestling in his stomach like a reptile. Smooth and wet, violence became part of him. It freed his darkest instincts, and it was too late to try and conceal the ugliest part of him.

Let me see how you die, he thought. It was feral, and it was an urgency that bloomed from the stomach. He shot again, aiming for the thigh. *Die, die, die, die, die, die, die.*

In an instant, Chuuya sprinted forward; despite the fighting before, a marathon of blood Dazai had not seen in a while, his reflexes remained as sharp as ever. He reached for the hooded assailant in the blink of an eye, in the time of a whiff. He decreased his gravity and increased his speed, shooting himself through the room— jaw set, fist ready. He didn’t even take off his gloves as he sprinted for Sonoko.

The child’s cry pierced the air, her voice strangled as she gasped.

“Chuuya!” Dazai called.

(Chuuya, the child.)

Quick as lightning, Chuuya's instincts kicked into high gear. “I bloody—“ he propelled himself forward. “— *Know* it.”

He was over the Ability User in a blink. He kicked him down and pulled Sonoko into a protective embrace, preventing her from toppling to the ground along with the man. Maybe Dazai didn’t play safe, but he played to *win*. Chuuya held Sonoko in his arms as he once

again manipulated the surrounding gravity, one foot firmly planted into the man's back. With a scowl, the executive shifted out of the line of fire while he increased the gravitational pull of the floor to ensure that he'd stay *down.*

"Good job, Chibi~"

"Yeah, yeah." The grimace was palpable in Chuuya's words. "Just don't shoot me too, dimwit."

"Well, I could shoot Chuuya's ugly hat. It'd be an *oopsie!"*

"I'll show your insufferable ass an *oopsie* when I finish with the trash here. *"*

Dazai offered both the executive and Sonoko a grin. "Uhh, scary~"

Still groaning about mackerels, Chuuya kicked the ability user in the spine. Despite the bone-shattering hit, gravity manipulation still glued the man to the floor. Even rolling to the side, gaping with his breath cut short by Chuuya's heel sinking into his flesh, took the strength of a thousand warriors.

As the man tried to lift a hand and grasp for air, Dazai's finger found the trigger again. The shoulder, this time.

He didn't even think about what would happen if he were to hit the heart — he didn't think about it because he wouldn't miss. He forced his hand to keep the aim steady, both eyes open. Mori had taught him to forget the weird wink actors did in movies: if he wanted to shoot, he ought to aim at every target with his head high and both eyes open. Years later, Odasaku had reiterated that tip.

Use it if you need to kill, Mori taught him. He was fourteen.

Use it if you need to defend yourself, Oda said. Before that day, Dazai never thought of himself as a life worth defending.

He kept the ability user in the line of fire as Chuuya scooped Sonoko more comfortably into his arms, the child clinging to him with silent tears streaming down her flushed cheeks.

"Hey, kid," Chuuya said, and he held her closer, adjusting her against his side. He forced a cheerful tone that made Sonoko sniffle. She didn't seem to mind the blood on his clothes, nor the stench of death clinging to his skin. She looked at them and, in that moment, Dazai felt grateful for No Longer Human shielding his emotions. "It's okay now. We've come to pick you up from daycare. You're safe."

"..."

"We're gonna take you home, okay?"

Her voice was thin as she hummed, reaching out to cling to a strand of his hair. "Chuuya-nii…?"

“I’m here,” Chuuya promised, as if the stains of blood on his clothes were nothing but jam. “Osamu, I’m taking her outta here.”

(Can you deal with this alone?)

Dazai didn’t even look at him, though he reserved a bright beam for Sonoko. He cocked his head to the side. ‘ *Of course. Leave it to me, partner.’*

“I’ll see you at home, princess. I’ll bring you a present, alright?”

Sonoko’s eyes shone with tears. “Hm’m.”

“You spoil her,” Chuuya murmured, indulgence bleeding into his voice. He held onto the child as if his sanity depended on it. Dazai smiled at him, too. A quiet, sad one. He smiled as if the arm holding the gun had not started stinging, and as if he didn’t notice Sonoko was scared of them too. It hurt like a bitch, this dream of normality that had fractured inside his body.

“Chuuya spoils her more. You sure are bad at being an adult.”

Despite a tight grin crossing his lips, Chuuya only clicked his tongue at Dazai’s joke. *Oh, fuck off,* it meant. “Now, kiddo, we are going for a little fly. So you need to hold tight for me.”

Instantly, soaking in the enthusiasm in Chuuya’s tone and expression, Sonoko relaxed a little. She loved it when Chuuya made her fly, and her little arms held onto the executive’s neck ever so tightly as she nestled against his chest. She knew he wouldn’t let her fall. *Dazai* knew it too.

“What about Dazai-nii…?”

“He’s coming,” Chuuya promised. “He’ll take the stairs.”

It convinced her. Thank goodness. She gingerly waved goodbye to him quietly, and Dazai smiled at her. Her smile turned a little brighter when he did that, and she disappeared with Chuuya and Dazai was alone; alone with the man, and alone with the demons he’d summoned.

Dazai could almost smell wet soil and blood and decomposition as he unearthed that part of himself, unleashing it as he stepped on the darkest side of an imaginary Acheron.

And *yet—*

Then, he turned to focus all his attention on the pale-eyed terrorist and moved closer. While gravity didn’t keep him shackled to the ground anymore, he was still bleeding and short-breathed on the ground. He had tried to crawl away and failed. As he took a laconic look at the man, Dazai’s smile slipped away from his face.

“Now— what do I do with you?” Dazai drawled, iron edging his voice. The man froze.

“ *…Please.”*

Dazai didn’t bother with an answer. His finger pulled the trigger again — and again. And again. Hip, shoulder, stomach. None of the vital parts, but enough to make him wish he were dead.

A scream roared in the empty halls of the warehouse, followed by the *thud* of the man’s body rolling on the floor as Dazai kicked him harder. He took a second to click the clipper into the ground, fishing in his trench coat pocket for a new one. 13 new bullets. 13 different punishments. The new trench coat might have been lighter, but the bullets in his gun were the same as four years before.

The man coughed spit and blood. Dazai supposed it must have hurt; gastric fluids must have started to travel up his throat with the retching impulses, trickling out as acid burned the bullet wound inside the man’s soft stomach.

Soon, it would hurt to breathe.

Soon, it would hurt to *exist.*

And yet the man would still strive to live, pushing through the pain, because human beings were stupid like that.

Dazai didn’t aim for vital spots right away because the Demon Prodigy played with his victims; he licked them until they were lulled into a reassuring sense of security, and he circled them and got bored with them. Then, he extracted every scrap of intel before breaking them.

Clicking his tongue, Dazai holstered the gun.

“I must admit, I’m surprised,” he purred, moving in circles around the man. “Before, you called me a certain name. What was that?”

The man coughed a mouthful of blood and bile. “I—”

“Say it. I might let you go if you get it right, you know?”

“…Demon Prodigy.”

Dazai’s expression hardened.

“It’s Armed Detective Agency, now,” he hissed before his foot collided with the Gifted’s mouth. The wet smashing of teeth and kicked gums quenched some of his thirst for blood. “Keep up.”

—

The sound of kicks and bones breaking under his foot filled Dazai’s ears. Just one more kick, he told himself. And one more. And one more.

One for Sonoko.

One for Chuuya.

One for *justice.*

He was supposed to do the job that saved people, right? Then what about the scum of the earth? Did they *deserve* salvation? With every kick, Dazai felt less human. But it was for his family, wasn't it? It was okay. It was—

"Oi, shithead. Stop hitting passed-out bodies."

Dazai turned abruptly, facing the barren wall where he was sure he heard Chuuya's voice. Where he expected to see the man grinning at him, stretching out his hand for Dazai to take. But he was alone.

The hits stopped anyway.

The man had long passed out.

—

When Dazai was done, the gifted had passed out on the floor, asleep in a pull of his own blood.

Dazai had kicked him so that he would be resting on one side, avoiding him to choke on his own blood and vomit. He breathed difficulty through a broken nose, his face beaten to a pulp.

And yet it wasn't enough. The sight wasn't even close to satisfying as Dazai strolled toward the destroyed wall, the sky clearing out vast and blue in front of him, and he clicked his speed dial to Chuuya. The call connected immediately after a rough static.

"Slug?" Dazai asked, glancing at the screen. "The connection is terrible. Can you hear me?"

A pause. Then, a familiar granular, warm voice let out a *ugh*. "Unfortunately."

"Oh, hi, Chuuya~ I thought I'd speak to your superior. Someone who actually knows the job?"

"Fuck you," Chuuya answered, although without bite. "Are you done?"

"Just heading out. I'm leaving a body for your squad – the conditions are pretty bad and I fear I've been a bit too naughty, but it's not a corpse *yet.* "

"Is the asshole still alive?"

"Barely." Before Chuuya could lodge in a joke about him being a softie, Dazai cleared his throat. "I'm not done, but I need backup. Send the squad in and tell them to get the trash delivered to dungeon B, assuming it's still the biggest one we can work with."

A hearty laughter exploded at the other end of the communication. Dazai grimaced. “Ah, ya think you can call in and still order everybody around, dickface? Who do you think you are?”

“Someone who likes to give suggestions,” he chirped.

“Suggestions my ass.”

Dazai hummed and let the jab slide unpunished. They were dancing around the primary subject: Sonoko. He was dying to ask about the child, but he knew she’d be safe with Chuuya. The truth was, Dazai couldn’t bear even hearing her name right now. Not when he had so much blood on his hands.

What kind of mentor was he? If he’d ever fantasized about being ready to raise a child, somehow following Odasaku’s footsteps, that dream had been shattered by tonight’s crimes. Sonoko’s expression while they fought had *stomped* on that dream. She deserved better than a parent who kicked a man to a state of almost death, too angry to stop himself from hitting an unconscious body.

He always hated fistfights, but using the gun had felt too impersonal, at a certain point. That was when Dazai had straddled the ability user and punched him with his bare knuckles. The man’s bones had popped with every collision of punch against skin. Dazai had hit him until his face was nothing but blood and mashed flesh.

Exhaling, he pinched the bridge of his nose. He swallowed a bit of spit that tasted dangerously like vomit. “Just answer, please.”

“I have the Black Lizard coming in now to support you. I presume you don’t want the Agency to see how you’ve beaten the guy up.”

“You have no idea,” he said. Though, to be fair, Chuuya knew him enough to imagine the exact state of the body. “The plan now is to make the bastard sing about the lab, and how he breached through our security system. One of the people we fought was a former lab ant, but we need to confirm if there’s somebody else behind this — and we need to do that before other attacks occur.”

“Since when do you share your plans with me, dumbass? I’m moved.”

Dazai’s jaw set. “Get the dungeon ready, please.”

“Who do you take me for? I’ve done that already.”

“Thanks.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya murmured. “We got the kiddo, and she’s freaked out but pretty much safe. You could not have done anything differently so do. Not. *Dare.* Beat yourself up. I’ll punch you if you do that.” He closed his eyes, focusing on Chuuya’s voice so as not to spiral. To ground himself, to remind himself of the things he could strive for — and the ones he had promised Odasaku he would not do anymore. Chuuya’s voice carried him home. “You’ve saved her.”

He shut his eyes.

She's not a job anymore, and Ango knew it would happen and he still allowed this situation to ferment and grow. Dazai never wanted this forest of feelings to fester in his lungs. To suffocate him. He hated himself, even if Chuuya was speaking with the utmost affection. Now he full-on needed to retch. Every inch of his body screamed in agony.

"Dazai," Chuuya called his name again. He seemed to reach out, never quite able to find him. "She's okay. She—"

"I'll see you at home," Dazai said. Then, he hung up.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! Thanks for reading ❤️
The support for this story is always overwhelming, I am beyond blessed and happy.
Thank you SO much.
As always, comments and kudos are absolutely my joy so let me know what you think!

Major thanks to Malaika, Ceres and Kei for being wonderful beta readers and helping me out with the chapters 🥹

We finally reached the last chapter of this fic, so I hope to see you guys for the last update. Thanks so much for being part of the journey with me. 🥹❤️

Come say hi on Twitter!

River Riptide

Chapter Summary

> “Ya know what your big brain never understood, Mackerel? That our Bosses might play war, but I’m never gonna be at war with you."
> *Some goodbyes, and some old friends.*

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Twenty-six years.

According to scientific studies, an average human being would spend twenty-six years of their life asleep. That equated to 9,490 days, or 227,760 hours.

Now, although that might sound like an inconceivable waste of time, that would also mean that an average person would spend one-quarter of their life dreaming.

Their body would not be resting. Their brain would never be static. It would always be concocting some makeshift memory to keep itself occupied, like an ever-running, free-to-enter, exhausting movie. Memories in technicolor. This whimsical kaleidoscope of images — twenty-six years of craziness, on average — was only built on images previously stored and manipulated by the brain during its time awake.

For twenty-six years of their lives, humans dreamt about death and about people who weren’t with them anymore, crafting old memories into something *new.*

For Chuuya, that only translated into twenty-six years of darkness.

Yet, he would have exchanged every dream he might have dreamed – all twenty-six years of them – to gift Dazai a single day of happiness.

—

The first thing Chuuya clocked in Hirotsu’s safe house was a big ‘*No Smoking Inside’* sign, and grimaced at the sight.

Maybe his short fuse was due to his fraying nerves, the adrenaline rush slowing down after the mission.

Maybe it was because Hirotsu — a mafioso, fuck’s sake — was telling him not to smoke inside the house, as if it was a crime or something. Maybe it was the stench of death and saltwind still lingering on his clothes.

The executive pushed open the door to the safe house with his knee as he adjusted Sonoko against his side, carrying her with ease without using Tainted. She weighed nothing. The child had been intermittently crying as he carried her down the stairs and into a scarcely decorated living room, her innocent mind slipping in and out of a terrifying conscience that something bad had happened.

“Chuuya-nii, this is—”

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” he murmured, “it’s a safe place. It’s uncle Hirotsu’s vacation home, yeah? You’re safe in here.”

After leaving Dazai to take care of the interrogation and Black Lizard in charge of the clean-up crew to secure the warehouse, Chuuya had been left with the infamous task of bringing the child home — well, *a* home, at least, although that did not necessarily mean his now-compromised penthouse.

“How are you, kiddo?” He asked, just to fill the unbearable weight of her silence. “You with me?”

Sonoko didn’t respond.
Chuuya didn’t presume to know how a child’s mind could process abduction; he never had that innocence in the first place.

Hopefully, her brain didn’t understand she had been kidnapped, probably. She couldn’t even spell kidnapped, *likely.* Dazai was doing what he could do with her schoolwork, but hey, a man had his limits.

But somehow, somewhere between the panic and the heaviness, Sonoko must have been conscious that she had, once again, witnessed a bloodbath.

It was nothing extraordinary compared to the night Chuuya had found her, extricating her little body from a corpse under the rain and the blood, but it was still death. Another little trauma that would make her into a grown-up too early, feeding her a violent kind of adulthood.

Chuuya would have taken her despair if he could. He would have done the same for every kid in the Sheep.
But Sonoko was trembling in his arms as he held her and paced up and down the room, her shoulders shaken by spasms and sobs she could not control. After a moment, Chuuya placed her on the couch in the living room.

It was a black leather couch, L-shaped, elegant and sinuous just to Hirotsu’s taste, and occupied half of the room. Chuuya twitched an eyebrow at the object; Kennedee Sectional Sofas were awfully expensive, too. The couch was a dark stain contrasting with the white designer furniture and gray wooden parquet, and it was so big that it seemed to engulf the child whole.

At least, Sonoko was blissfully unaware of the price of the object she was covering in tears and snot.

Kneeling in front of her, Chuuya made her blow her nose into a tissue.

“Good,” he crooned, his voice a gentle rumble as she obeyed and nuzzled into the fabric. God, look at him. Ane-san was going to cry of joy. "Good, like this. We can check if there’s ice cream in the fridge next, okay? I hear Hirotsu has a secret stash of sweets—" *Ah, fuck.* The only stash Hirotsu had was probably nicotine and recreational drugs. Chuuya grimaced, wiping off a tear from Sonoko’s reddened cheek. “Here, let’s get you cleaned up. And we’ll run a bath to get rid of this nasty dust, h’m?”

Although she was still wearing her school clothes, now covered in dust and crinkled beyond salvation, she had lost her gloves.

It was a blessing in disguise, Chuuya told himself, so she could soak in every inch of forced, *stubborn* happiness that the executive willed himself to radiate. Yet, despite his effort to act chipper, she couldn’t stop sniffing.

It broke Chuuya’s heart; she kept her crying low and hidden as if a louder noise would make her presence noticed in the house. She didn’t *want* to be found, not again, and the conscience stomped on Chuuya’s heart and made him feel like shit about all the things he had miscalculated. When he tried to move a lock of brown hair away from her forehead, parting her fringe in two, she retreated like a beaten puppy. The wide eyes she lifted on him were brimmed with tears.

Don’t hurt me, every inch of her body begged.

He would never hurt her. However, Pillow Diaries had *felt* him inflict pain on someone else. For the first time, the child in his arms had met Nakahara Chuuya — the executive, the *murderer* — and learned the shape of his violence. She'd sensed the bloodlust pumping in Chuuya’s veins.

“Hey,” Chuuya said, adjusting in his squatting position. “It’s okay, kiddo. It’s me. You hurt anywhere?”

She swayed her head. “H’m.”

Relief washed over him. It was a visceral sense of calmness like an invisible weight had melted off his shoulders. “Yosano-sensei is on her way,” he promised. “She’s going to check that you’re alright. Is that fine? You like Yosano-sensei.”

Sonoko only mumbled a half-answer again, curling into a tighter ball on the couch. Quickly, Chuuya stood up, shrugged his jacket off his shoulders, and wrapped it around her. She silently buried her nose in the fabric, and Chuuya considered screaming into his hat out of sheer frustration. *Fuck.* He was running out of ideas.

“Hey, what about I make some tea? And then a bath.”

“H’m.”

Well, that was unhelpful.

Despite the lack of enthusiasm, Chuuya decided he'd make some herbal tea anyway. He padded to the open kitchen, hastily putting on a kettle and rummaging in the cabinets for two mugs (bless Hirotsu and his diligence; the Double Black-assigned safe houses were always a mess) as he kept an eye on the bundle on the couch. Hell knew he needed a bottle of wine and likely some pills but, *hey,* they'd make the chamomile do. In the end, Sonoko drank her tea, and said it was warm and nice. She'd been cold in the warehouse, she said, and that the tea was like a spark in her tummy.

Chuuya told himself that he was getting pretty good at this game of guessing what she needed. He might have played this game forever.

"Do you remember when we met, kid?" He said, settling next to her on the couch and scooping her to his side. "It was a very special day."

Still wrapped in his jacket, Sonoko looked at him with hollow eyes. "I know," she only said. It sounded like she knew so much more than that.

"You should be proud," he promised. "Everything's gonna be okay. You were an amazing little girl, back there."

A heartbeat of silence. "Oh."

"What?"

"Chuuya-nii has said that already," Sonoko mumbled. "I saw it."

Memories flooded his vision the second the words left her mouth. *'He's safe thanks to you; you were always amazing like that. You should be proud.'* They went on and on as he blinked and saw an open ribcage and a bloodied floor. Chuuya recognized the trigger only when it was too late. Only when Albatross' light was already flickering behind his eyelids. '*Doc is safe.'*

Why are you like this, a voice in his head barked, *always reassuring people when you can barely hold yourself together?*

Overwhelmed by the need to yell, Chuuya patted her head and said nothing.

—

Dazai's return was announced by the obnoxious clack of the front door.

The tea mugs had been left on the coffee table, Sonoko had started to yawn occasionally after being changed into some clean clothes; Yosano was late, and Chuuya had yet to move from the couch (and his jacket was now covered in snot, too). It wasn't *great,* if you asked him. At least Dazai was home.

The executive felt Sonoko stiffen, her interest shifting from a bunny doll to the door as soon as they heard the noise. He caressed her head to signal that it was okay.

Dazai slipped into the house without a word, tension turning his shoulders taut, looking like a ghost and *smelling* like one. Gunpowder and death and human fluids. Torture came with a unique reek, bitter and pungent, and its smell stuck on Dazai.

As he looked at his partner, toeing off his shoes in the *genkan.* Chuuya could see the bulking veins on his neck under the bandages. His grated knuckles were in plain sight. The tips of his shoes were stained red, too. His partner's poor excuse of a pulled-together act was tearing at the seams.

"I'm home," Dazai called out.

"Welcome back, dumbass." So domestic; the *irony.* "Your Doc colleague will be here in a few hours."

'You kicked that asshole for me too, yeah?' Chuuya's eyes asked from across the room. The other man nodded.

"Good," Dazai answered. "Thanks for calling her."

"No problem. Prisoner's getting the whole Port Mafia welcome pack?"

Dazai's grin stretched. "All of it and then some. The Agency wanted in, too."

Chuuya bobbed his head. Although he couldn't speak for the Agency, he knew his partner: if there was something Dazai lacked, it was certainly not finesse in dealing with prisoners. With that assurance, the executive considered himself satisfied. He gestured for Dazai to head for the couch while he stood up, taking Sonoko's mug to the sink in the kitchen as Dazai scrolled off his trench coat and joined the child in the living room.

The interrogation must have been a bloodied affair. Dazai's sleeves were rolled up and, underneath, his forearms were naked, ephemeral skin crossed with ragged scars. The folded sleeves hid the blood on his cuffs, likely. Somewhere, in Kunikida's car, Chuuya could imagine an abandoned pile of gauze drenched in red.

Chuuya remembered a similar occasion during the Dragon's Head conflict when Dazai had staggered home too tired and disgusted to bother with a clean change of bandages.

That led them both back to Hirotsu's expensive couch, with Sonoko hidden between them and intermittently exploding into sobs. He and Dazai had agreed on finding a way to make her fall asleep that didn't involve Xanax or any variation of the sort, but Chuuya was running out of stamina.

He wanted to cry too. He felt exhausted, and dealing with someone else's emotional strain after a mission *sucked.*

Sonoko clung to Dazai's hand, her eyes wide with a fear she was only beginning to elaborate — she seemed to be calm one moment and then she wasn't anymore, horror starting to surge as all the memories came back to her. She had climbed on Dazai's lap, too, allowing the man to cradle her in the safe circle of his arms. He patted her hair whenever her reddened cheeks

rubbed against his chest. When she started to gasp and gape for air, shaken by a crying fit, he rocked her gently as he would do with a toddler.

"It's okay, princess," Dazai said. "It's okay to cry. Can you breathe for me?" She cried harder, and he guided her face against his chest – against his *heartbeat*. He smoothed her hair, his willowy limbs lulling her oh so gently. "That's perfect. You're safe now. It's okay. We've got you."

In response, Sonoko's small fingers clung tightly to Dazai's body. She was pulling at the soft tufts of hair at the back of his neck, but he didn't complain. "Dazai-nii…"

Chuuya imagined she was equally seeking reassurance and a moment of respite from Pillow Diaries. She could not turn off her Gift, but Dazai brought silence to her head. It quieted down her Ability, and it paused all the surrounding emotions — what a blessing it must have been, to not feel at all. To not be subjected to everybody else's emotions, and breathe and pause from the overwhelming violence of the night.

"…It was dark."

"It know. Did you like your tea, princess?" She nodded with a tentative bob of her head. "Good, good. Chuuya'a good at making tea, isn't he?" Another halfhearted nod. "Listen to me, sweetheart; it's fine to cry and let it all out, but Chuuya and I will never let anything bad happen to you. Everything is fine now."

Chuuya watched from the sideline, his heart crinkled like an old towel. He felt heavy and slowed down, as if liquid cement had been injected straight into his marrow.

"…I was scared," she murmured, and Chuuya's heart cracked open.

"We know, kid." Chuuya's voice came out in a murmur, even though there was no reason to whisper; he scooted closer and rubbed her back with a hand. "And it's fine to be scared. But you were very, *very* brave."

"They were red," she murmured. Her grip over Dazai's hair tightened, white-knuckled.

"The bad man's thoughts?"

A tentative nod. Then, she dipped her face back in the crook of Dazai's neck. "Hm'm. Too much red."

And Chuuya knew that, if he could, Dazai would have tortured the man and every person in that warehouse all over again. He would have killed him twice, and three times more. "You don't have to worry about it anymore," the detective swore, voice low and yet somewhat holding the transparency of ice.

"Dazai is right, you know," Chuuya whispered to her, patting her head so that she would be looking at him. "You have nothing to worry about." A pause, and she sniffled. He saw how her little nose twisted, mouth curling downward as panic washed over her face all over again — and maybe *he* panicked a little too because he cracked a shaky grin. Maybe he looked

drunk, maybe he looked *stupid.* “Hey, kiddo, you know what– Do you want to hear an android joke?”

Sonoko stopped crying. She ogled at Chuuya, vast eyes full of confusion. “Huh?”

“A—”

After a second of flabbergasted confusion, it was Dazai who first exploded in a hearty chuckle. A chuckle from his *belly,* and that released all the tension in the room at once. It was enough to turn Chuuya a bright red as he poked a finger in his direction. “Shut up, Bandages! It *did* help *me* when I wanted to cry!”

“So you admit you wanted to cry, back then!” Dazai sounded delighted about it, and Sonoko blinked.

“Of course I wanted to cry, idiot!”

“Idiot,” the child repeated under her breath, touching the tip of her nose. “It’s a bad word.”

“Huh, well…”

Immediately, as if she’d just remembered something important, her cheeks puffed up. “I told *that* — I said ‘*shitty’* to the bad man.”

“You did?!”

“Good job,” Dazai praised her, with a sage nod of his head.

“Yeah. You tell ‘em, kid,” Chuuya echoed, giving her a thumb up.

He’d never been more proud; except, perhaps, when Akutagawa had accepted to put down that damn coat of his to step into a bath. That was a damn big victory, too.

After that, Sonoko settled into Chuuya's embrace, her eyelids slowly beginning to close. After a handful of minutes and more soothing words, *and* Chuuya refusing to do his rich girl impersonation, exhaustion finally won her over. Thanking all the gods for that small mercy, the executive gently scooped her up and took her to Hirotsu’s wide, empty bedroom. He held her close, his own heart aching as he rubbed circles on the child’s back and felt her gradually turn unconscious in his grip.

They’d sleep in the safe house for the night.

When he walked back to the living room, Dazai was still on the couch. He had helped himself to Hirotsu’s liquor cabinet, too, and poured himself a glass of whisky. However, the almost-empty decanter that had appeared on the coffee table signaled that Dazai had fixed himself two glasses already — filled to the brim, too. Chuuya curled an eyebrow.

“Well, aren’t you a little, resourceful thief?”

“If the shoe fits,” Dazai replied without looking up. He stared at the bottom of his glass and then took a gulp of whisky, his voice strained by the alcohol as he spoke again, "Thank you, Slug."

Chuuya wondered if the whisky was to hide the tired strain in his voice.

“What are you thanking me for, now?”

“Everything.”

"You don’t have to, ya know,” he said, and surprised himself by meaning it. He scoffed a joyless laughter, throwing back his head. “Fuck. *Fuck,* look at us— busting our asses off and saving a child. Since when have we started taking off charity work?”

In silence, Dazai poured himself another glass. Two fingers, then he took a glance at it and sloshed another generous amount into the glass.

As the lack of sounds settled around them like dust, Chuuya’s own heartbeat throbbed in his eardrums. He listened to it until it became unbearable.

“Oi.” He tapped an index onto the coffee table. “You’re really not going to offer me some?”

Dazai shrugged. “Chuuya doesn’t like whisky, but there’s wine in the cellar.”

“Damn it, you’re a fuckin’ mess. Just give me your goddamn glass, Mackerel, I need a drink.” God, *they* were a mess. At least the sudden warmth of the whisky sloshing down his throat, igniting a fire in his stomach, punched him awake. “I heard you over the microphone, you know — when you told the guy you’re Agency.”

Dazai hummed. “I did.”

“Right.”

“What’s your point, Slug? Last I checked, I was still on the Agency’s payroll.”

A smile found its way to Chuuya’s lips. Tachihara had spoken about the Agency’s loyalty, that desperate sense of belonging that tethered all the detectives together. “Yeah, you’re welcome to stay there. Just, Boss told me ya were going to inherit the organization, ya know? Must’ve been a few months ago, now. But that’s—” *That’s bullshit.* “--But the Agency assholes are your people and, no matter the shit Boss says, you fit there beautifully. Gotta be because you’re an asshole, too.” Tiredly, he leaned his head against Dazai’s shoulder. His nostrils itched with the smell of iron. “Maybe, we can fit together just as beautifully, as well.”

It felt like learning an unfamiliar word and repeating it at every turn, performing a literary surgery upon it, wearing the sound out and abusing it until it lost its meaning. The carcass of a word. A deaf song.

Family. Family. Family. Family.

—

Dazai and Ango sat next to one another at Lupin’s counter.

The warmth of the low ceilings, the wood, the clink of glasses, the foamy Golden Fizz in Ango’s hand and the whisky in his own — it all felt like a faraway dream. The humming from an old jazz record reached Dazai from a distance, caressing his senses as if through cotton. He couldn’t focus on it. Jazz reminded him of Odasaku. It reminded him of a night when he heard gunshots and his best friend smoked one last cigarette in his arms.

And now he was losing someone else too. Something borrowed, something *entrusted.*

“Calling it’s not like you, Dazai-kun.”

Dazai's eyes bore into Ango's, his expression schooled into detached nothingness. "Nostalgia is a powerful tool, wouldn’t you agree? It makes a man do unbelievable things,” he replied, idleness heavy in the way he roiled the whisky in his glass. “You never show your face around here unless it’s for business; scared a ghost might bite you?”

“I’m not the type of man who lives off memories. You know that.”

Liar.

Not that Dazai blamed him for it — for escaping the memories that haunted the place, equally a source of comfort and blades under the skin.

He didn’t hold Ango responsible for not wanting to remember a blackened-out time when he was a friend and a triple agent; at some point, he had to pick between those two sides of the same bad coin. The one decision Dazai would never forgive him was that he didn't pick Odasaku.

Dazai’s existence was a sketch – ever-changing, always erased, with torn pages and messy dots that he was still trying to figure out a meaning for – and it was *adaptable.* Versatile. The beauty of his chaos was that there was no real order to it. Ango was different.
He pushed himself to the limit, and pushed and *pushed* some more. That made Ango’s so-called solid life weaker than a house built on sand.

Quietly, Dazai lifted his glass. “I guess we should toast.”

“To what?”

“To friendship.”

“I’m not really in the mood for a toast,” Ango said. The man’s grip over the glass trembled as he took a sip of his drink, the milky yellow of the liquid waving as he tilted the glass and smacked his lips in appreciation. His glasses slipped down his nose a little with the movement, but the rigidity of his posture told Dazai that he had picked up on the hard edge of his words.
The detective straightened up on the stool, too, as if to stand taller for the conversation ahead.

“Look, Dazai-kun, let’s cut to the chase. You want to talk about Sonoko, so let’s talk.”

Dazai’s lips curled up. “I don’t know what you mean.”

There was not an ounce of truth in his words and Ango knew it; Ango knew *him.*

“You have every reason to resent the government for what happened with Sonoko-chan. And I’m sure you have already guessed what will be the next move for the Special Division.”

“I’m just enjoying a drink.”

“You’re distressed.”

Dazai scoffed a chuckle. “Aw, Ango, projecting much?”

“You forgot to order Odasaku’s whisky,” Ango murmured, as if that mistake alone could prove his point. Which was absurd because Dazai never forgot Odasaku’s drink. *Never*. It wasn’t possible.

Then Ango side-eyed the empty stool, and Dazai froze as he zeroed in on the empty spot; no glass stood at Oda’s usual side. He *did* forget.

Urgency seeped into him, followed by an icy jolt of guilt. He’d slept two hours in total in the past two nights, and always poorly. While they remained in Hirotsu’s safe house as a security measure, Sonoko had taken a habit of sleeping between him and Chuuya in case someone else returned to kidnap her.

“Oh,” he murmured.

I’m sorry, Odasaku.

Ango creased his lips. “I’m not blaming you for being stressed, for the record. The incident was everybody’s mistake. We all let it happen.” Ango sighed, and it sounded somewhat patronizing. Dazai knew he was projecting. He also knew that his emotions were running unshackled, and he had no way to control them. "We did everything we could to protect her; you *know* we did. But what I don’t understand is why you, of all people, want to adopt a child. A child you knew from the start you can’t raise, a child that *scares you.”*

“ I thought you said you weren’t here to judge.” He shook his head. “Chuuya and I saved her.”

“You did, sure. For now.”

“And we are more than capable of raising a child.”

“You can only turn her into a target. A child with Double Black? That’s a nuclear disaster waiting to happen. Don’t you think she’ll have all the organizations in the world after her in a *day?* Or do you plan to lie to her until she’s old enough to understand that Daddy dearest is a criminal?”

He shuddered. Ango had a point and, yet, in that perfectly realistic reasoning, all he could hear was the echo of Chuuya's voice. '*We can do it if we want to,'* it said. They could be bigger than their sins. How marvelous that possibility seemed, however fleeting.

"She found a home with us."

"And she will find *another."* Ango frowned. "Kids are ductile."

"I see," he hummed, cocking his head to the side. "That must seem like a good reason for the government to dispose of her, indeed. After all, it's just a Gifted being shipped from this location to a more convenient one – she's too young to put up a fight, too, which saves you time and resources. Ordering Sonoko-chan around is as easy as feeding treats to a kitten in exchange for tricks."

"Aside from the involvement of Double Black, the most impending task now is that she'll never be found again."

"That's why you're shipping her north," Dazai declared.

"I'm sure it's difficult to hear, but you understand sacrifices are necessary for the greater good."

"Sacrifices?" The chuckle that spilled out of his lips tasted bitter. "Come on, Ango, you are talking about a child's life."

Now you talk like Mori.

Ango leaned forward, resting both his elbows on the counter, his eyes locked onto Dazai's. The reflection of the warm orange lights gleamed in the lenses of his glasses. "And it's with her best interest in mind that I'm saying this. We found a location for her, a suitable house with a decent level of protection and someone who is accustomed *to ability users."* A pause. *"*Allow me to be brutal, Dazai-kun: you and Nakahara-kun are no one for the child."

Dazai arranged his face into a mask of nothingness, but the words bubbled under his skin.

He and Chuuya were but a fleeting moment for Sonoko, but she had turned into an anchor for them. Ango had a point, and Dazai hated it — part of him hated the process, and he hated Ango in silence for carrying it on. Dazai didn't hate often.

He breathed in, his voice trapped in a cage made of bones. "I thought it would take time."

"She was supposed to be in the care of the Agency and Port Mafia for a few months, maybe *years,* but the incident has sped up the procedure. Now, Chief Taneda is keen on moving A1559 to Hokkaido as soon as possible."

Sonoko's ability number hit him like a storm. She was in the same class as Chuuya — *Ability,* man-made, from a facility. Dazai, with his N0001, had always been the only known member of his Non-Ability class. And he was glad that, at least in that series of numbers, she wouldn't be alone.

“Where?”

“I can’t reveal the details as of yet, but she is going to be handed over to two former military officials. A good couple that will take care of her. Taneda’s friends.” Ango met Dazai's gaze. "And that’s when I heard about you and Nakahara asking to adopt the child. *Why,* Dazai? Off the records, and off of everything. I thought you didn’t want a family.”

He quivered. “I used to think the same. Then, some things changed.”

Chuuya would spoil her rotten, and their family would allow Dazai to prove himself. He would turn out a better educator than his parents.

“Nakahara-san and you. Are you two…?”

“I wonder. I would say so. Sometimes, it feels surreal. Like I don’t deserve him,” he murmured. He had wanted to tell a friend, honestly.

He wasn’t sure Ango was that kind of friend. He wasn’t sure he trusted him, but the man and an old camera and an empty glass were everything he had left from those old, grieved days when the light of friendship bathed his life. How brash their happiness used to be. Now, Ango’s betrayal had burned them to dust.

“I understand,” Ango said. When he nodded and took a sip of his drink, Dazai saw hesitation on his face — and it would not change anything, but it was a consolation of sorts. “Sadly, sympathy is the only thing I can give you. You two would have done a good job, if the decisions were up to me.”

“But they aren’t,” Dazai echoed.

“They’re not. And my superiors believe it's in the child’s best interest — and the one of the Agency, too. More threats are coming. We had to act quickly."

"It wasn’t your decision to take.”

‘It was always the government’s decision, the Agency was just a placeholder,’ a voice whispered to him, ‘*why did you allow yourself to forget it? Are you an amateur, now?’*. He drowned it in whisky. “You can’t expect me to not have opinions.”

Ango hunched over his drink, his voice softening. "Odasaku would have wanted an innocent to have a better life.”

Throat parched, Dazai stared at the counter without actually seeing it.
‘Don’t meet my kids, Dazai,’ Odasaku had said to him. It was a time when Dazai was still tainted with Mafia Black blood. *‘Please. You know the consequences if the information ends up in the wrong hands.’*
He didn’t know right from wrong, back then. Did he learn anything about it, now? Was he *better?* And it didn’t matter anyway; Odasaku’s kids were all dead. If he focused, Dazai could still smell the embers and the smoke from that day. He remembered the melted parts of

a dismembered van and the black, ragged bones occasionally collected by the firemen in the debris; he still heard the echo of a thunderclap in his ears.

Just like them, Sonoko could—

Biting at his bottom lip, Dazai focused on the *thud* of ice being smashed against the counter (Lupin's ice was always smashed, one learned, never cut). He let his head be filled with the gurgling of the wine being poured for the other patrons who had just occupied a table— and underneath it all, he could hear the ghost of an old jazz record. "Ne, Ango, can I let you in on a secret?"

"H'm? Sure."

"I hate jazz music," he murmured. It reminded him of Odasaku, and of the things he loved and lost.

"I see."

"It reminds me of him, you know."

Ango's head fell lower. "Yes," he whispered, "me too."

"Whatever happens with this mission, I can't lose Chuuya, too." *I've not enough heart left to lose him again,* he thought, though Ango would never understand how his heart shriveled at the prospect of losing Chuuya, how his mouth filled with salt at the fear of being hated by the one who gave him life.

"If I may, Dazai-kun, you are not going to lose a partner who looks at a dragon and tells me he's going to fight it because *you* are in there. Your kind of idiocy is off the charts." Ango's voice lowered, and he stopped and smacked his lips. "During the Shibusawa incident Nakahara didn't care about our debt, I believe. He came because he wanted to save you. How *disrespectful* you two are, flaunting this bond of yours like that."

If Dazai's heart jumped into his throat, that was only for him to know. "So you agree that we can keep the child safe."

"You will keep her in the line of fire."

"We can find something — boarding schools, babysitters."

"You mean you'd raise her with the Detective Agency?"

"If needs be."

"That'd be way too dangerous to be considered as a possibility. Besides, the Port Mafia would not sit still and let it happen," Ango countered. His shoulders had hunched, carrying the relaxed posture of someone who *knew* they were right, and that the negotiations were closed. "If I may, my impression is that you are enamored with the mission, Dazai-kun. You're infatuated with this domestic bliss because it showed you things you never thought about before, things you never considered important or attainable. But you know the secret to

domesticity? It's *boring*. And you've got to live with it; that's the whole point. That sense of wonder will die, and then you'll be left with a partner and a child — and you do not *want* to raise a child."

"You can't know that."

"I saw you with Akutagawa-kun." The accusation pierced his heart, leaving him speechless for a second as Ango cleared his voice. "I have a better understanding of your methods now, and your reasoning. Judgment is not up to me. But this— *Odasaku* would have wanted us to make the best decision for the child, even if it meant letting go."

Dazai's shoulders slumped.

The memory of Oda's wishes weighed heavily on him, but Ango's actions had been driven by a desire to honor their common friend's legacy. In his own way, at least. A way that Dazai didn't particularly like, but that had left him out of countermoves. Checkmate, *again.*

"If that's the case, I'll be the one to tell Chuuya."

"I'm afraid it won't be possible. Paperwork needs to be signed on both sides as soon as possible, and my boss—"

Dazai's smile hardened.

"Ah, I'm sorry, you've mistaken me. That wasn't a request," he cut Ango off, voice stripped of any kindness. Just the bare bones of the Demon Prodigy's disappointment and Dazai's very own sadness. Funny how they separated into different entities, at times — he felt *other* than himself, Shuuji and Dazai and Demon Prodigy. Osamu, sometimes, when life was kind. He put down the empty glass as if it could fracture in his grip. "Thanks for the drink."

—

It was kind of surprising how heaviness and emptiness could live inside Dazai's body at once. He thought he got used to how hollow and flaccid his existence could be, dangling about as he made his way through throngs of people who couldn't see past his masks.

Sometimes, he stopped to dissect the concept of *endurance,* and the way uptight people like Kunikida found value in it. Erect was an erotic word, for Dazai, in the sense that he'd seen unshakable characters as steady as buildings and got himself hard over the thought of corrupting them. That is not to say that he got off thinking of Kunikida, of course. Chuuya, though? *Ah.* With those spring-like eyes and that loyal, righteous soul trapped in the body of a sinner. He wanted Chuuya.

He wanted him so much it hurt, that it did not matter *where* or who was looking as long as he could take his partner's face and cover it with kisses, until he would slowly make space for his little corrupted self in the man's upright world. It had been a careful balance, keeping his hands to himself while Chuuya was around; muffling the man's moans with kisses as they fucked with their clothes still half-on, shushing each other in the middle on the night. He'd

been as *obvious* as to jerk Chuuya off under the blanket, TV blasted in full, as Sonoko slept in the other room and they pretended to watch a movie.

He was dirty to the bone. People like him should have rolled over and died; it would have saved everybody a headache or two.

And he'd tried to do that.

Oh, he *tried.*

But he could not die and so he endured, trapped in the lived-in emptiness of a cage someone dared to dub 'the human mind'.

In the quietude of the Armed Detective Agency's kitchen, Dazai's gaze remained fixed on the cup of tea in his hands, its comforting aroma filling the air. The conversation with Ango still gnawed at his heart, a parasite chipping away at his control until at one point, he would have either accepted the decision or fought it with more than a sliver of intention. Sonoko was never his responsibility. If anything, she was *Ango's* responsibility.

Another government failure.

And amidst it all, with gunpowder and blood still sticking to his skin, he couldn't shake off the despair that ate away at him.

When Atsushi joined him in the kitchen, Dazai had lost count of how long he'd been sitting at the table with his head in his hands. He pretended to be snoozing, but he was *thinking.* Without a word, Atsushi poured a cup for himself and tiptoed to the empty chair in front of the man. Transparent plumes of smoke rose from the cups. Atsushi said nothing. For some reason, Dazai *knew* the boy could sense the turmoil inside his brain.

It was all stored in the way he flashed quick glances at him, in the way his lips were pursed as if holding back a question; Atsushi was easy to read and easier to *predict.*

"Huh, Dazai-san," Atsushi began, his voice gentle and slightly splintering at the end. "Are you okay?"

"It depends," he answered. His voice croaked, unused for so long. "In the grand scheme of things, though? I'll recover. I'll do so rather fast, in fact."

Atsushi scrunched his nose. "Ah," he said. Few words disguised as many meanings as a simple *ah.*

"Ah?"

"You're doing it— Yosano-sensei said you would."

"Doing what?"

"You're *minimizing."*

Dazai shrugged the accusation away. “There’s really nothing to minimize.”

“Maybe it’s not my place to say, and I don’t mean any disrespect and probably I am *way* out of line, here, so I’m sorry if—“

“Just speak, will you?” Dazai hummed, not lifting his face. He could still *hear* Atsushi flinch.

“I guess— I want you to know that you've been a tremendous mentor to me. And not just to me.”

“I suppose you’re not talking about Akutagawa-kun, here,” he said, voice leveled, and only then he lowered his hands to cup the mug Atsushi had prepared for him. He didn’t realize how icy his fingers had been before touching the warm ceramic. He felt boned-out, polished into something without a texture anymore — into a life that was just smooth and plain and without a shape. Everything slipped past him, nothing gripped him. He felt *slippery.* A clean-cut bone instead of a person.

“No,” Atsushi said. He swallowed. “I don’t mean him. I meant Sonoko.”

Dazai looked up, his eyes meeting Atsushi's, and a hint of surprise flickered in his gaze. "I wasn’t a mentor for her,” he murmured. “I didn’t mean to be one.”

“With all due respect, Dazai-san, you don’t *plan* to make a change in someone’s life. But from what I have seen, you change people’s lives — it’s *kind* of what you do.” Atsushi continued, not noticing how his words had slapped Dazai. "You know… when I was in the orphanage, I was never allowed to cry.”

Dazai’s heart wrung. “Is that so?”

“The headmaster said that only children with a family are allowed the luxury to cry if something troubles them.” He was not looking at him anymore. His eyes were lost somewhere far away, past Dazai, and the saddest curl of lips made its way to his face. “But I know Sonoko-chan was free to cry, if she was scared.” *She had someone who cared.* “You've shown a child kindness, patience, and a sense of belonging. Trust an orphan when I say that is something she will carry with her in the future."

Dazai's expression softened as he allowed a small, appreciative smile to grace his lips. His grip relaxed around the mug. "Thank you, Atsushi-kun."

“Is there any way we— and you and Chuuya-san, of course — will be able to see her in the future?” His lips curled up. “I liked the child.”

She didn’t make the tiger feel like a monster, Dazai supposed.

“That’s unsure. Apparently, they are moving her up north with a civilian couple.”

“Will she develop something similar to Chuuya-san’s ability, do you believe?”

Dazai shivered. He didn't have an answer, but the question had spawned in his head occasionally and Chuuya seemed to consider a Pillow Diaries' version of Corruption (a code of sorts that Sonoko might have to unblock) as a realistic possibility. The idea rippled through him, and he wondered if something like that would have been even possible. Chuuya needed a password to unlock his corrupted state, and that had erased all his data before. *If* the experiments had not been updated in the last ten years, she might have to undergo a similar fate. Yet again, they had little documentation on Sonoko. Chuuya's files had been a *luxury,* not the norm.

And she had no Rimbaud, she had no Verlaine, but she had *Chuuya* — and that was everything a child could ever desire, in Dazai's opinion. Someone who valued them not as a weapon, but as a human being.

"That is a good question," he murmured, almost to himself. Atsushi, who had lifted his cup to his lips, stopped mid-gesture. "Your detective skills are improving, Atsushi. But you've got something wrong too: Chuuya did not *develop* Corruption. It was always inside him."

"I see."

"If Sonoko has a similar Gate inside of her, I hope for her sake that she'll never have to find out."

A light twinkled in the boy's eyes, encouraged by the response. "A life as a civilian… it would not be too bad, would it?"

Dazai's gaze returned to his tea, a mixture of emotions swirling within him. "No," he murmured. "It would not be bad at all."

If he were a civilian, maybe his existence would have been different. He would have been an author or a painter, or both. He would go on a hike on Mount Fuji just to seek the right words to express how overused such a view was, he'd try to put into words his longing for his native land in Tsugarou and Aomori. He'd journal his voyages and record his failures.

He'd eat crab with friends and drink apple juice, and he would have Chuuya — *all* of him, 'until death do us part' and beyond.

But he was no civilian. He would never be one, and yet he lived on.

Maybe that was the meaning of endurance, after all.

—

Chuuya was lounging on the couch in his living room when Dazai informed him of Ango's decision.

Dazai spoke with deliberate coolness, casting his words with care as if to control Chuuya's reaction: "The government has found a permanent adoption for Sonoko," he said, "After what happened, they want to relocate her as soon as this week."

And just like that, once again, Chuuya was discarded like a tool that had extinguished its usefulness. Not a word of thanks. Not a drop of *recognition.*

Sonoko was in her bedroom, engrossed in the new cat encyclopedia for kids that President Fukuzawa had bought for her and far enough to be oblivious to the simmering of Chuuya's blood. He couldn't stand the acceptance painted in the smoothness of Dazai's face; not when his own frustration and anger surged within him like an untamed storm.

The executive clenched his fists, knuckles shaking and barely aware of the rumble that surged from the center of the earth as his distress escaped the reins of his self-control. A crater opened under him, bending the wooden floor.

Thud. The damage reverberated through the room, dust and wooden splinters cracking under the power of gravity, but Chuuya paid it no mind.

"Can you please not destroy the house, Slug?" Dazai asked, though his irony fell flat.

"It's *my* house," he replied — and it sounded *petulant,* somehow, which he regretted immediately. "Sorry. I'm just pissed off."

"Do you think I'm not?"

Chuuya passed a hand over his face, his mind struggling to process the information. "Sorry. I know. It's just that we— *shit.* It wasn't supposed to happen this soon. It feels like a fuckin' punishment."

The somber nod Dazai gave him told him that, despite being left to roam on a relatively long leash, the situation had never been in their control. Sonoko was never meant to stay forever. She also was never supposed to be kidnapped from right under the noses of the major organizations in town, *and yet.* Shit happened. Shit happening brought forward consequences they had no control over.

"Ango has been informed of our request," he murmured. "But they think it's the best decision for her to leave."

Chuuya's frustration bubbled beneath the surface, his fists clenching harder. "Ango can shove his glasses up his a–" His voice halted as he registered Dazai's brow furrowing. *Damn it.* "I just can't stand it, ya know? Those government people always meddling with shit."

"We knew this day would come. Kouyou didn't promise anything."

"It happened too fast. She has that assignment for class I'm helping her with, and her homeroom teacher is meant to visit, and she was looking forward to the aquarium, and–"

Before he could talk himself into a spiral, Dazai reached out to place a hand on his shoulder. The weight of it made Chuuya want to crumble, coming undone under the touch.

"Hey. It's okay. She'll be safe," Dazai said, and the *lifeless* acceptance in his voice made Chuuya's knee jitter. His partner's willingness to let himself be carried by the tide terrified him, at times, for he knew the man would hardly fight for his own survival. He'd die an idle

death, or live an equally idle life.
Chuuya wanted to believe that Dazai's truest, ugliest emotions ran deep behind the dead surface of his irises, but he wasn't so sure.

Swallowing, he glanced over at the door to Sonoko's room. From the occasional rustling of paper and burst of giggles she was still lost in her book, and his heart ached at the thought of never hearing those sounds again.

"Doesn't it make you want to fuck shit up?"

Dazai took the question in; he had violent brown eyes. Violent eyes and a calm face. "It's happening as it was supposed to be."

"It's been just *months."*

"It was a job."

"A job I'm not sure if I messed up or not," Chuuya whispered back, teeth clenched, his frustration boiling in his veins.

Dazai's nails sunk into Chuuya's covered skin like claws. They'd leave marks. "You saw how she looked when we got her back — as if she could count the bodies piled up in our past."

"Yeah, I know."

"And you know what happens to people like us. You said it yourself." He took a moment for Chuuya to *understand* what he meant before saying it. "We never keep ourselves alive for long."

Chuuya sighed heavily, his anger gradually giving way to a distraught, stale resignation. He combed a hand through his hair. "You don't have to tell me." His shoulders slumped. "I'll miss the kid, though. She grew on me."

"You've done your best."

"But did *that* change anything, at the end of the day *?"*

"I think it might," Dazai said, flashing him a smile. "The princess is tough."

"Yeah. That she is."

Chuuya hummed, sinking deeper into the couch. He didn't want to admit how he felt taken advantage of, at times, and yet he was sure Dazai understood it. That feeling of being *used.*

"Do you think we would have pulled it off?" He asked instead, reluctantly pushing the words out of his mouth. "Being parents or whatever."

It was quite depressing to chat about hypothesis. It was the talk of someone who lost, and the words rolled sourly in his mouth as he toyed with the idea that he'd been defeated, and tried to make peace with that. From the moment he asked Kouyou, a part of him had gotten cozy

and comfortable with the possibility of adopting Sonoko into his life. That possibility took shape over time, growing into a semi-certainty; and here it was now, biting him in the ass.

Dazai hummed in response, giving a noncommittal shrug. “It’s not like we’ll ever know it, now, will we?”

“Helpful, Mackerel,” he answered. Too much bite. Too much spite. But it was good to bare his discomfort in all its ugliness, he realized, because that prompted Dazai to sit straight and look at him with a different kind of seriousness.

“I mean—” he answered, quieter now. “—yes. I think we would have pulled it off. Somehow. But there’s really no point in torturing yourself with *might have’s* when the matter is out of our hands.” His shoulders slouched, and he looked older and more ruined – like a rag, overused and pushed past the point of repair. “Have I ever told you how I murdered my father?”

Chuuya scrunched his nose. “No. Ya didn’t tell m—” he halted, mouth opening slack. “Oi, oi, oi; Hold on. Did you just say you killed your old man? Are you for fuckin’ real?”

“I didn’t tell you, did I?”

He took a second to rearrange his jaw. “I’m pretty sure I’d remember something like that.”

“I murdered him.”

He said it like it was just something that happened — they ran out of milk, Sonoko needed a new doll, it started raining. Dazai had killed his father.

Chuuya chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“Holy shit,” he said. Not his best remark, but it felt appropriate.

“Shot him to death, and then some more for good measure. You might have heard of it, really – they covered it up like an illness, had a nice and clean cremation ceremony behind closed doors before anyone could see the corpse and leak the news to the press. My brother probably took up his kids and wife from their Kyoto estate and pretended to weep his heart out.” Dazai breathed in, and Chuuya took the chance to digest the information.

His partner had a brother.

Due to the inhospitable character of the man and his flaunted rootlessness, Chuuya had always assumed Dazai was all alone in the world — some kind of self-spawned devil put on the earth to spite him. And yet, he recognized that having a brother born from the same loins didn’t make Dazai part of a family. “In my house, my ability was a commodity to be sold. So, if Sonoko cannot have that – even if one person can be spared that fate, thanks to the President and the work we are doing at the Agency, I’ll be grateful enough.”

Chuuya shivered. “I see,” he said, a whisper through a set jaw.

He wasn't an idiot; he knew what Boss did and how he exploited abilities to tie children to the organization to ensure the future of the Port Mafia. He knew. Once he realized there was nothing he could do about it, Chuuya had acted to ensure those children would be treated as fairly as possible, and given a fair shot in the Port Mafia. They'd develop and grow, and thrive in the organization.

He would have done it for Dazai as well, if he only knew. Dazai was no child, but there was no one else Chuuya wanted to shield more than him. There was no one else who deserved a chance more than the beaten, ruined child that Dazai Osamu used to be – the one who got sold for his power, and Chuuya didn't even know it.

"…Chuuya."

"Yes?"

"My name is Shuuji," he said, not even looking at him, eyes lost in the emptiness of the wall, and Chuuya's stomach dropped for all the faith resting in that unfamiliar bundle of sounds. "The name I was given at birth. Tsushima Shuuji."

In lieu of an answer, hoping the silence would prompt more info, Chuuya licked his bottom lip. He tasted the name on his tongue, not surprised to realize he couldn't find the man he loved anywhere in that cluster of sounds. He didn't pry, grateful for that drop of honesty. He threw a five-second funeral for the man Tsushima Shuuji could have been, the man he would never know, and moved on.

A small death.

Dazai hummed as he moved closer to him, folding his legs against his chest, head lulling to the side and body loose-limbed. His bony knees prodded Chuuya's side. If he said anything more at all about his family, Chuuya didn't hear. The man only lowered his head on Chuuya's shoulder, and the executive petted his curls and kissed the crown of his head.

"Do you want me to call you Shuuji, then?" He asked, quiet. He would have done it, if asked. Dazai let out a throaty noise, his voice strained with sleep.

"No," he said. "Call me by my true name."

"Mackerel?"

Dazai's annoyed groan was cut short by a yawn. "Not funny."

"Rest, Osamu." He whispered the words with fingers sunk in dark curls, breathing in the man's closeness. Dazai relaxed under his touch.

Chuuya hugged him and let Dazai intertwine their fingers together in return, with nothing but their respective heartbeats bumping in his eardrums.

That same night, a few hours later, Dazai had passed out in Chuuya's bed with uncharacteristic ease. He must have been worn out. Sonoko was already asleep in the other room.

Relishing the silence of the penthouse, Chuuya pressed a peck to the flushed skin of Dazai's shoulder before untangling himself from his lover's arms. As he padded to steal his partner's too-big shirt to cover himself up and headed to his studio, the executive told himself he never thought he would see the day when he'd climb out of a bed with Dazai in it.

He grabbed a burner phone and dialed an international number. He'd given up on Shirase and his 'outta doing cool shit' voicemail.

"European Detective Police Organization, this is Gabrielle Zevin speaking. How can I help?"

Oh, thank fuckin' God.

"Hello," he greeted the second the call connected. "This is Nakahara. I need to get in touch with your London branch."

Dazai was right; no one ever promised anything to them, after all. Good thing Chuuya had prepared.

"What department, sir?"

"Huh. Shit if I know, I—" He bit his tongue. Damned Europole and their overcomplicated organizations. "Design, I believe. Android design."

A small pause. "Shall I put you through with the Engineering department, sir?"

"Yeah," He glanced at the door, softly measuring the studio's perimeter with bare feet. "I need to speak with Dr. Wollstonecraft. It's urgent. Tell her it's an old friend."

—

According to the moving company hired by the Government, a confidential business of the utmost secrecy, Sonoko's stuff would be shipped to Hokkaido in a week.

Chuuya's penthouse would be emptied out soon enough, leaving behind only dust and spacious rooms that felt too big to be filled by one person alone. With a black government car waiting for Sonoko downstairs and Ango loitering about in their foyer, who had politely refused to take off his shoes as if to stress that he had no intention of lingering about, Chuuya helped Sonoko into her coat.

It was made of black wool, elegant, the picture-perfect copy of Kouyou's taste. She'd take it to her new house, she had declared, together with a teddy bear in a detective outfit Dazai was still holding for her.

The teddy bear's right side was covered in Dazai's bandages, and everyone from the Agency had added a little something to the toy. *'His name is 'Samu,'* she had declared.

"Chuuya-nii," she said, big eyes jumping from him to Ango as Chuuya smoothed the heavy cloth of her coat, "who is this man?"

“He’s a friend,” Dazai answered. Thank God for his partner, Chuuya thought, because he was going to throw up in his mouth.

“Right. Doc Glasses here is going to take you somewhere nice for a little while.”

“Oh.” A pause. “Home for dinner, then?”

Chuuya stifled another mouthful of bile crawling up his airways, breathing from his nostrils, and did not reply. What was he supposed to say, when he knew she would never see Yokohama again?

“Look, kiddo. You’ll be out for a bit because Dazai-nii and I have work to do, but a friend is already waiting for you in your new home,” he said, squatting to get to her level. He ruffled her hair, and he sensed her tension as his own. “So be good, alright? He’s a little funny and maybe a *taaaad* bit annoying, but he’ll take good care of you.”

“H’m.” Which meant *'I don’t want to’,* but Chuuya knew better than to expect Sonoko to voice out what she wanted – especially if she was given different instructions. She could be sneaky, but she was never *disobedient.* Obedience was something that lab people like them learned young and carried on their shoulders for their entire life.

“We’ll call you as soon as you arrive,” Chuuya promised.

“And we’ll visit too,” Dazai agreed, handing her the teddy bear.

“Promise?”

“*Promise.”* Chuuya grinned. “It’s an adventure, though. You’re going to have fun.”

“…I don’t wanna.”

Chuuya’s heart cracked as he straightened up, escaping her hands – escaping Pillow Diaries and the chance to be called out on his true feelings when she could not understand them. He didn’t want *her* to go, either. That was a surprise in itself. There had been a time when he thought he would be relieved to return to his old life.

“Come here, princess,” Dazai said instead, opening his arms, and a strangled noise blocked Chuuya’s airways.

It was to expose her to No Longer Human. He *knew* it. It was convenient. Still, Chuuya never thought people like them could hug someone and *mean* it, pouring all the emptiness of his own existence into somebody else's life. This emptiness filled someone else’s life.

Was it a paradox? Was it *impossible?* It surely sounded impossible, and yet it had happened. If that oxymoron made the situation a miracle, Chuuya could not say.

Sonoko lifted her blinking eyes on the brunet, crystal-clear and filled with tears. She sniffled before shooting herself into the hug Dazai was offering as if she could guess it was the last one she’d receive for a while.

Jaw tightening, Chuuya threw a glance at Ango.

“This is cruel,” he hissed through gritted teeth, lips not moving at all. Ango shook his head.

“This, Nakahara, is out of my hands.”

It was another whisper, just as *low.* Chuuya didn’t answer. There was nothing left to say, anyway. the possibility was slipping out of his hands before he could punch his way through the storm. He knew when to stop fighting.

It was over.

Defeat tasted sour on his tongue, like blood that had been left to dry under the sun. At least, Dazai stayed.

–

They were cuddled up in each other’s arms, the blankets kicked at the end of the bed, mind dazed and lost in a lazy afterglow after having sex. Making love. Chuuya wasn’t sure about which definition to use. He had been told the latter was cringe but, as Dazai detangled himself from Chuuya’s hug and announced he needed to take a quick shower, the executive realized he craved the human connection that came with it. *Love.* Oddly enough, he never told Dazai he loved him. Not a single time he had allowed those words to escape him – not because of their untruthfulness, but because of the weight they carried.

All he knew was that he had been feeling like borrowed space in his own body ever since the incident with Sonoko’s kidnapping, and then being whisked away to fuck-knew-where.

Earlier that day, Boss had rang to congratulate him and Dazai on the successful rescue mission. The unsaid was that the seamless communication *despite* the different organizations once again proved the versatility of Soukoku’s partnership sat heavy in Chuuya’s stomach. Their readiness to work together unprompted would be useful. It might even signal Dazai’s will to collaborate with the Port Mafia one-on-one.

When his partner returned to the bedroom after his shower, steps velvet-quiet and towel-drying his hair, he was wearing nothing but boxers and his own flushed skin. Chuuya didn’t raise his head to greet him.

“So she’s really gone,” he just mumbled, cheek pressed into the pillow.

A part of him hoped Dazai would throw his head back, laugh and tell him he’d hallucinated the whole mess. He did not.

“Yes,” Dazai agreed in an exhale, flopping onto the mattress next to him without bothering with a fresh set of bandages. He stretched his legs, a subtle tension oozing from his limbs as he pillowed his head in his arms and leaned against the headrest.

“I never asked you— How was it?”

“How was what?”

“Torturing someone after such a long time.”

Dazai tutted, eyes fluttering close – and for a second, Chuuya thought the man would *fall asleep* on him in a sheer attempt to avoid the conversation. They’d never been very good at talking things through, the two of them. They avoided every mess until it lost importance; anemic problems that they left to wither, and ended up dying before they were ever truly recognized. It was like ignoring a fire, hoping it’d never expand beyond a manageable disaster.

“Chuuya is assuming the Agency doesn’t use violence to settle its scores,” Dazai said, eventually. Chuuya felt barely awake as the man pulled him against his chest, enlacing their legs together.

“And would that assumption be right?”

“At times.”

Chuuya arched an eyebrow, unsure what to make of that, but Dazai breathed out and sank deeper into the bed. He looked exhausted. Disheveled, skin flushed because of the steamy shower, body crossed with old scars that Chuuya remembered intimately. His eyes were violently brown and circled in purple, the paper-thin skin around his eye sockets swollen and darkened because of the recent lack of sleep. Chuuya had seen him chug down four coffees that morning while working from home. The executive scrutinized his face, worry tugging at his stomach.

“You look like shit.”

“Why, thank you,” Dazai answered, the jocular tone doing a poor job of hiding a barbed truth. “Fun thing to say after, you know, you fucked my brains out.”

The laughter Chuuya let out was raucous. He did not appreciate *judgment,* Dazai; especially not if it came for his so-called dog, because that tended to be right despite the bullshit masks Dazai dispensed to everyone. “I don’t mean it in general, and you know it. You’re beautiful. You *still* look like shit, though, and I’m getting worried.”

“I suppose I’m tired.” A pause. “I’ve been talking to the President, too.”

“Did he say anything about your next job?”

“Not yet. In the meantime, I suppose, I’ll move back to the Agency.” To twist the knife in the wound, Dazai gave him that quirk up of lips that would have made Chuuya lose his footing on a good day. On a bad day, it pushed the executive on the verge of mass murder. Incredible how the bastard he loves so much could be so charmingly *annoying* without even trying. He sounded so calm, too. It gave Chuuya the creeps to know that something he held so dear could just vanish come morning.

Had it all been said in the heat of the moment, had it all been done to see through a mission?

“Okay,” he encouraged. “And…?”

“What do you want me to say, Slug?” He said, rubbing a hand over his face with what Chuuya was *fairly* sure was unnecessary pathos. “We go back to our normal life until Mori-san and the President decide who is being exchanged. If the Agency will take the deal, of course.”

Chuuya arched an eyebrow. Now, *that* sounded plain stupid. “You surely won’t try to weasel your way out of the debt you owe the mafia.”

“Who knows? You *did* try to kill many of our members — plenty of times, too. Next time we see each other, we might be enemies.”

“*Osamu,”* he said, propping himself up more on one elbow. He could see constellations of marks and bites on Dazai’s skin. He was fine with his lover bruising easily and crying until his voice faded, as long as it happened in a bedroom with enthusiastic consent and not on a battlefield.

“I don’t want it, but it’s a possibility.”

“We’re in a truce.”

“The truce is unstable. You can thank Mori-san’s greed for that.”

“No one would benefit from a war now.”

“I wonder if that’s true,” Dazai said. He seemed to bite back that the Port Mafia would always profit from bloodshed as if pointing that out could get him kicked out of Chuuya’s bed (it *could)*, and Chuuya wanted nothing but to prove him wrong; he could not. “For now, Ango said he’ll take care of things like paperwork and stuff for Sonoko’s school, so… that’s just it. You got London on the job, I’m free of any obligation. We can toast to another successful mission, and let’s call it a day. Sigma has been using my room while I wasn’t there, but it’s high time I go back. Chuuya never wanted me to move in, right?”

“Said the man naked in my bed.”

“And still you don’t want me parked in your house forever.”

Chuuya pouted and intertwined his legs with Dazai's. No, he did not want his partner *(boyfriend?)* to move in. Despite everything, he liked having a whole penthouse to himself.

But he also never envisioned himself reading parenting blogs or binging rom-coms in the hope of absorbing how to live a normal life. God knew he never planned to fall in love. Or, at least, to admit out loud that many years before he had fallen in love.

And yet.

His hand moved before he could realize it. He grasped at Dazai’s wrist before he could think — because his brain was screaming to let the man go yet his heart was pounding, begging for one last offer of connection — and pulled him into a kiss, covering his mouth with his own. Dazai's jaw slacked to deepen the kiss, lips rough and tongue warm. When gentle teeth scraped his bottom lip, Chuuya sighed.

Thanks to Dazai, he had discovered that a kiss could be more intimate than lovemaking, deeper than grinding in dark corners with wandering hands and brain dizzy with want. Their frenzied touches turned slow when Chuuya's hands found Dazai's hips and Dazai's fingers sunk in red locks. He gasped for air and Dazai chased his mouth, biting at his bottom lip in that toe-curling, *absolute* way that had Chuuya turning into putty. His murky heart needed reassurance and validation, and Dazai gave it willingly.

Pulling away, just one word ricocheted in his mind. Intense; stubborn in its honesty.

"Don't."

Dazai looked at him, the sclera of his eyes painfully clear and the pink of his lips *unbearably* red. "What?"

"If you want to go back to your dorm room at the Agency, do it tomorrow," Chuuya answered, his ankle still hooked around Dazai's shin. *Leave when I can't stop you, if you must,* he wanted to say. *Do it when this emptiness inside of us is not threatening to devour all the lights we've found in these months.* "Even better, leave behind a spare change of clothes. And a toothbrush, too — this house is never short on bandages, anyway, so don't worry about those."

Dazai's expression darkened. "You're asking me to stay."

"Possibly," Chuuya compromised.

"Is it because of what I said about the truce?"

"Screw the truce. Like I care 'bout that."

A flash of feral joy passed across Dazai's face. "I'm not sure Mori-san would appreciate that sentiment."

"Well, cry me a fucking river and call me a traitor, Mackerel, I don't care. Ya know what your big brain never understood? That our Bosses might play war, but I'm never gonna be at war with *you.* If I had that option, if I *could* get rid of you, your pestiferous mouth would be making out with the curb already." He shrugged. "Alas, I seem to be *indelibly fated* with said pest."

Slowly, Dazai licked his lips. Chuuya wondered if he was looking for the remains of their kiss. "You had chances to sell me out; in fact, if your tiny Slug self wanted me dead, Meursault would have been the perfect opportunity to make it look like an accident."

Ah, that stung. "Do you think I'd kill you during a mission and make it look like a miscalculation?"

"It'd be convenient enough to justify."

"You're my first choice, dickhead. Everything else comes after."

Kouyou and Mori were right: after all, Chuuya — oh so loyal, perfect soldier Chuuya — could betray the organization. He had grown a traitorous bone in his body, and it was all because of Dazai.

And he had found that he wanted to salvage those torches of hope that came with Dazai's presence in his life, because he didn't want to go back to wandering alone in the shadows of Yokohama's endless darkness. The shadows seemed unfamiliar, all of a sudden. Dazai had turned his world upside down.

"I love you," Dazai declared, voice quiet, not quite daring to reach out himself. "But I am not going to risk your safety because of it. Especially if Mori-san will see our reconnection as a threat."

"There's a lot we can compromise on — we can lay low, and I can think of a few options between you dipping and you moving into my fucking house."

"H'm. Like what?"

"You're fishing," Chuuya declared, lips puckering as he glared at his partner's flushed cheeks. How unsightly: a fish who tried its hand (fins?) at fishing. "Stuff like dating, you moron."

"So Chuuya wants to date a traitor, huh?" It was heavy, *oh so heavy.* "Are you sure?"

"Are *you?"*

"I've been waiting for years," Dazai replied, tilting his head to the side, and Chuuya could taste his entire future trapped inside those words.

Pulling him closer, threading their bare legs together and looking for Dazai's fingers, Chuuya didn't answer; not immediately, at least. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, and he pushed his forehead against Dazai's and *inhaled*. He was sure, and he was scared, and he was in love. Desperately, *stupidly* in love.

Because he had a big, empty bed and an even bigger empty house, an empty life, and he was —

"—Good," Chuuya breathed out, an inch away from Dazai's lips. "Good. Because you've got four years to make up for, and I've never been good at letting go."

Chapter End Notes

HELLO!
Thank you so much for reading. I had to divide the epilogue as it was too long (a certain duo from London speaks too much *cough*), but stay tuned for it on Monday — or let me know in the comments if I should post it earlier! 👀

As always, MAJOR thanks to by fantastic beta reader Malaika for all the patience and the time spent on this fic 🥹 And thank you so much Bea for helping me out with this last chapter ❤️ I appreciate you both so much!

Thank you once again for all the incredible support for this fic and Soukoku's little family. Comments and kudos are super appreciated and make my day, so let me know what you think (emojis count)! 💕
I'll see you for the epilogue!
Come say hi on Twitter!

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

> 'I want to live with you,' huh? In Dazai's strange vocabulary, such a confession was deeper than any 'I love you.'

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yokohama
6 months later

Yokohama was a wonderful city until it wasn't anymore.

Although the accidents involving ability users had been few and far between, not in short measure thanks to the Agency's efforts and the Port Mafia's iron fist over the city's underbelly, sometimes an unwanted ruckus still shook the peaceful existence of the citizens.

During such occasions, Chuuya was called to squash the roaches that dared to crawl out of the woodwork. He didn't mind it, most days.
It was like getting some extra exercise time outside of the gym, and fighting put him in a cheerful mood. And, sometimes, he had to deal with the (not so) occasional nuisance.

"Hi, Chuuya~" said pest chirped into his radio, causing Chuuya to halt in the middle of the pavement.

The corner of his eye twitched. He focused his attention on not ripping the mic off his ear and hurling it at the other side of the street, starting to count ten. One, *I can't believe this shithead,* two, *what the fuck,* three, *I need a vacation.* He took in a deep inhale from his nostrils.

For someone who hated work, Dazai took his job as a clown very seriously. But Chuuya was *indeed* an executive and, as such, he knew better than throwing a tantrum in front of his subordinates because of an idiot fish.

"What the hell ya think you're doing, dimwit?"

Dazai had the gall to sound surprised. "I got myself a radio, of course!"

"Who allowed you to do that?!"

"Boo, Slug, no one allowed me to do anything. Obviously. Has that ever stopped me, though?" *Right.* In the deafening heartbeat of silence, rubbing his face in defeat, Chuuya

could picture the man's radiant beam. Bastard always looked too pleased when he could sneak into the Port Mafia's facilities and 'take souvenirs'. "Just kiddin,' Hirotsu gave me an extra one in exchange for cooperation on the next joint mission."

Chuuya sighed, resuming his walk to the target.

Now, *that* annoyed him even more. Dazai might have waltzed out of the Mafia many years before but was still elbow-deep in its politics and pulling strings from the shadows. Classic Dazai.

Someone might have said that Dazai joining the constantly underpaid, *good-boys-club* Agency meant him getting the short end of the straw. That was, for lack of a better word, bullshit.

The Machiavellian asshole always got his dirty paws on both the long and short ends of the straw, and snatched *all* the remaining length too just for good measure. *Controlling fucker.*

"Fine," he relented, one hand running to his temple to rub it with his digits. "What did you need, anyway?"

"I've got important news to share with my one and only partner, of course~"

"You're not going to sing me the entire horoscope page *again,* are you?"

"Why are you complaining? It was fun!"

"Like hell it was."

"Chuuya's so ungrateful about my effort to entertain him, he clearly doesn't love me."

Please, go entertain your new partner or something, he mentally begged. Kunikida *had* to take responsibility and deal with Dazai during working hours. Chuuya was willing to *pay* him to be Dazai's babysitter, even, if the man needed an incentive.

As he closed his eyes, the executive exhaled. The vivid, suddenly tempting image of himself strangling Dazai with his own neck bandages flickered in front of his eyelids.

"If you don't stop right now, Bandages, I'm going to tell Kunikida about the overdue paperwork you've shoved in his drawer," he warned, trying to keep his voice level.

When Dazai let out an outraged squeak, Chuuya could *taste* the pout in his voice.

"So brutish! Chuuya would never."

"Chuuya will do that and *fucking* hang up if you don't tell me what this is about."

"Gasp?!"

Something in Chuuya broke. He was pretty sure it was his patience. "Wh— No one says 'gasp' to *gasp,* you moron!"

“But Chuuya is being mean to me!”

“*You* are the one abusing my patience.”

“Ugh. Fine. I’ll tell you but, first, Chibi must promise he will cook crab tonight. The premium kind, I’ve already bought it with your card.”

Chuuya glanced at his subordinates. He reminded himself he was in the middle of a mission, and couldn’t waste time arguing. “That is fine.”

“…Just fine?” Dazai coaxed. He must have thought it had been *way* too easy, and he was not used to being handed things. Too bad Chuuya still thought it was wise to pick his battles, and Dazai could have this one.

“Yeah, whatever.”

His partner let out a high-pitched, delighted squeak.

Once again, dealing with the bandaged asshole was surprisingly similar to sorting out a nasty case of kidnapping: the less Chuuya struggled, the more he cooperated, the sooner his partner’s shenanigans and happy-go-lucky attitude would stop pounding on his nerves. There was really no other way to describe it: Dazai was constantly stomping on people’s nerves. In fact, Dazai stomped on Chuuya's patience with the same mindless enthusiasm of a child jumping into puddles after a summer downpour.

“I knew Chuuya had a heart, under that hideous vest and tacky jacket.”

“Make it quick, dickhead.”

“My, oh my, that’s not what Chuuya said this morning when I was doing *him.”*

Chuuya froze, jaw slack. Suddenly, he was *very* much aware of the unsecured line — and the audience that came with it.

And with that prompt, his treacherous mind summoned all the images from the previous evening and earlier that morning. Dazai’s head buried between his thighs, eating him out. His own mouth trailing kisses down Dazai’s bare chest, the headboard thumping with their thrusts. Dazai moaning his name. Begging him to move faster, just like Chuuya *knew* he liked.

A shiver rolled down his spine. Gritting his teeth, the redhead forced the memory away.

Okay, he thought, taking a ragged breath as the reminiscence of dazed, honey-gold eyes haunted him. *Okay, that’s enough.* His dick took notice, though, painfully receptive to desire blooming in his stomach.

So Dazai wanted to test his patience, huh? The little dirty fish wanted to push him to the limit, thinking there would not be consequences? Well. He was *wrong.*

The executive knew that his asshole of a boyfriend liked to make him work for every scrap of shared intel. That wasn't new. Yet, right then and there and with a blush warming his neck, Chuuya decided he would make him pay for it ten times over. He'd bend Dazai over the table the second they got home, and he'd make the goddamn brat curl and writhe until the only thing left in that smart brain of his was Chuuya's name.

He'd make Dazai *cry* for a moment of respite.

A new kind of urgency bubbled in his belly.

"Osamu," he purred, voice gravelly as he pinched his nose, "*Sweetheart.* I'm in the middle of a job, so I swear to God it better be important, or the second I come home I'll fuck that pretty, angel-like mouth of yours until it has learned how to cooperate without blabbing." A strangled sound at the other end of the line. *Bingo.* "Now be a doll and tell me what you know, will you?"

A pause.

The cords of Chuuya's heart *reverberated* in that infinite moment of silence, in the expectation that surged with Dazai's pause — the silence being dragged until it became a caress over the executive's skin. His arms exploded in goosebumps.

Instinctively, he *knew.* His body sensed that, whatever his partner was going to say next, it would be important.

"Ango called," Dazai said, his voice suddenly serious.

Chuuya's stomach dropped to his shins. "Is there a problem?"

"She's settled in. We can visit her."

All his anger immediately deflated.

"…You're kidding," he breathed out.

"If I were kidding, I would pick a better joke."

"*Shit."*

"I take it, I'm forgiven for taking the radio?"

Are you still going to fuck me? Dazai was actually asking. Chuuya could do that. For now, he let out a bark of laughter. All the annoyance washed away as quickly as it had rumbled onto the surface. *Fucking hell.*

Perhaps the radio was a blessing in disguise, after all: right now he could have thrown caution to the dogs and kissed Dazai breathless in front of everybody. The last thing he needed to complicate his already messy day job was to let his entire team witness what an embarrassing crush he had for a traitor detective – with shameless PDA attached. No, sir.

Still, the executive could do little to hide the grin that had cut his face from cheek to cheek; he felt wild, and he felt *alive*.

“Still to be decided,” he said. “Talk later.”

‘Talk later’ which meant: ‘*See you at home’. ‘* See you where we both belong’.

He had a hunch Dazai had not disclosed the entire conversation with Ango and, all of a sudden, Chuuya could not wait to finish quickly, show up at the Agency’s office and drag Dazai home for an early dinner. They’d plan the trip to Sonoko’s new home over a bottle of wine. Petrus, perhaps.

Adam sent him pictures and the occasional report – Chuuya swore he did not need reports, especially not the *‘please find attached a pastel drawing of the Agency’s tiger’* kind, but the android enjoyed them. Who was Chuuya to rain on his parade? – and whatnot, but seeing Sonoko was another *thing* entirely.

It had been six months.

Months not knowing how much damage he'd caused – not knowing if he could visit the Flags tombs with a high head. He had avoided the shrine he now associated with Murase’s memory because of his guilty consciousness.

He did not know if he’d failed the people who had once taught him the meaning of ‘home.’

Most of the time, ending a hard mission was a personal matter. It was less about debriefing and more about the *closure* that came with counting his wounds at the end of the day, welcoming them into his present.

How many wounds had Rainmaker left him with? How many ghosts did it unearth, when all was said and done?

Soon, he’d demand his answer.

—

That March had been uncharacteristically mild.

The sun in the north wasn’t as relentlessly stubborn as the weather in Kanto, baking the asphalt until the air became wobbly, but the cherry trees had blossomed uncharacteristically early across the region, and the breeze coming from Aizu was a gentle caress rather than a prickly wind.

That year Chuuya had, indeed, developed an unlikely allergy to pollen. Specifically, Hokkaido pollen.

He refused to find another viable explanation for the sudden influx of tears in his eyes – which, mind you, he kept *strictly* under control – and the swollen lump closing his throat at the sight of two people he had not seen in a long time. They were waiting in front of a traditional villa, two adults and a child, while he and Dazai approached them. His eyes

prickled, and Chuuya blinked faster. It was pollen.
It had *nothing* to do with the figure in front of him, with the kind smile and the blue suit and the short brown hair styled to perfection.
Was an android supposed to cut his hair? Was it even a question he was allowed to ask?

“Master Chuuya!”

“Yo,” Chuuya greeted, lifting a hand in a relaxed greeting while the other was hidden in his pocket. *Liar.* He acted all cool and yet was *mushy* inside. “You look like a banker.”

For a second, Adam looked like he was about to start listing all the tasks a banker performed and that he had not been programmed to complete or understand. Then, in an unmistakable glimpse of humanity, his brown eyes softened.

“It’s been a while, Master Chuuya,” he said, moving closer; the same suit, the same broad shoulders. “You’ve grown.” A pause. “Well, not in the sense of growing in stature as it is likely to expect of teenagers—″

“Hey!”

“Chuuya-nii!”

Instantly, Chuuya’s grin widened as his attention zeroed in on the child sprinting past Adam’s leg. “Yo, kid,” he greeted, a big smile dancing in his voice as Sonoko rushed to him.
Before he could move Dazai had already crouched, knees popping as he bent to pick up Sonoko. She gingerly threw her arms around the man's neck, gloved hands holding onto the collar of the detective's shirt as she let him pick her up. She hummed his name, her voice wobbly as she called him *Osamu-nii* and told him how much she missed home; Dazai soothed her as the child hid her teary face in the crook of his neck.

It's okay, Dazai told her. *I've missed you too.*

The man had always handled Sonoko like a princess, and something in Chuuya's chest melted at the sight like snow under the spring sun.

She was wearing a blue dress, and a jacket with a Sheep skull that Chuuya was *rather* sure he knew. *Damn it.* He wanted one, too. If the Sheep was producing merch, he was going to call dibs and get his hands on some of it. They owed him a damn t-shirt.
Chuuya side-stepped closer to his partner, ruffling Sonoko’s hair. When she turned to look at him, sniffing loudly but stubbornly holding back her tears, he rubbed her flushed cheek with his knuckles; featherlight, almost afraid he'd lose her all over again if he allowed himself to get too close.

“Is Adam being nice to you, kiddo?”

She nodded. “H'm-mm. Uncle Adam makes me cupcakes.”

“Does he, now?” Chuuya shot a grin at Adam, his head cocking in a complicit nod when the android beamed. “I've definitely got to try one, then.”

Adam seemed happy with Sonoko, and the weight of the world seemed to slip off Chuuya's shoulders. Something warm settled in its stead, a spark that felt suspiciously like relief. Adam would be a good company, for Sonoko. He knew how to warm up a space and how to joke without being abrasive, he knew how to smile with his eyes and laugh with his full stomach — meanwhile, Chuuya had allowed violence and coldness to seep into his character, hardening its edges.

The last time he had crossed paths with the Interpol android during a cross-organization meeting, Adam had just learned the concept of a *bear hug* — courtesy of Shirase — and had the wonderful idea of trying it on Chuuya.

The executive now supposed that standing close to Dazai was going to be enough to avoid any unwanted hugs, but a yell proved him otherwise. His body recognized Shirase a second before *seeing* him, but it was too late to dodge. A silver-haired tornado threw himself in his direction, hooking an arm around Chuuya's neck and pulling the executive into an embrace while screaming 'hey, bitches' into his ears. Chuuya's hand mechanically went to his knife.

"What the f—?!"

"Hiya! If it isn't my favorite subordinate."

By his side, although still holding Sonoko, Chuuya could feel Dazai tense. How his brat of a boyfriend had engaged for years in a one-sided feud with Shirase would *always* be funny to Chuuya.

"Who the hell is your subordinate, hah?"

"You, of course! Long time no see. Have you come to join the New Sheep, Mr. Port Mafia Executive?"

"I'd rather eat rocks," he said, slipping out of Shirase's grip. Nonetheless, he smiled and extended his fist so the other could initiate the Super Secret Sheep Handshake.

They stepped away from Dazai — as mentioned: super *secret* — and Chuuya swore he could hear the man seethe. *Manchild.* Despite himself, though, Chuuya loved that side of him: spiteful and weirdly youthful.

After getting in touch with Dr. Mary Wollstonecraft ("You can drop the *Godwin Shelley,* yeah? It's bloody long.") and getting her blessing, Adam relocated to Japan with the Yamazaki family as Sonoko's personal bodyguard. Wollstonecraft kept Eve in London. Shirase— well, no one could *exactly* tell what Shirase was up to, and for how long he'd stay around before returning to the New Sheep. Chuuya only knew he was happy to see him.

"It's good to see ya, mate," Shirase said, patting Chuuya's back. "Good to be back home, too."

"Yeah. It's good to see you," Chuuya said, not untruthfully.

“I just hope you’re not trying to recruit a child,” Dazai hissed, turning Sonoko away from the man and shielding her with his back. Shirase ignored him and threw a thumbs-up to the child. She giggled.
After so many years and with several miles separating them, Chuuya still had no idea if Shirase enjoyed riling up his partner on purpose or if God had simply programmed him with the power to annoy Dazai without realizing it. Nonetheless, he mentally prepared to hear the high and mighty Demon Prodigy moan about ‘stupid Shirase and his misplaced overconfidence’ through the entire return journey.

“Dazai-nii,” Sonoko called, gently tugging at the man's bolo tie, “Papa and Mama got me a new dress.”

“Oh? I’m sure it’s *so* pretty~ What color is it, princess?"

"Blue."

"Do you want to go inside and show it to me and Chuuya-nii? We also have some presents for you.”

“Yes, please!”

He petted her hair, and Chuuya's stomach crinkled. Six months after leaving Yokohama, Sonoko still melted in Dazai's palm like a kitten. Kouyou told him children remembered the first people who showed them kindness, and he hoped she was right. He hoped Sonoko would remember them. “Aw, someone taught you some manners. That’s very nice. And next time, we’ll bring Atsushi-kun too—“ The child’s eyes glistened at the idea of her giant *cat* visiting. The family had a cat, but the tiger was still Sonoko’s favorite, and she demanded regular pictures. “He says hello,” Dazai winked, “but, you see, he’s now at a very secret kitten convention~”

“He’s finishing up your paperwork,” Chuuya quipped. Dazai ignored him.

“—and he is searching for a secret ball of yarn—"

“Ya mean, Kunikida’s pen that *you* have hidden?”

Again, Dazai ignored him. Sonoko did too, too mesmerized by the tale. “—But he’ll see you as soon as he can! With the cute dragon, too.”

‘Cute dragon’ meaning *Rashomon.* Gosh, Sonoko was surely going to grow up fearless, with the most fierce ability users in the world at her beck and call.

"Chuuya-nii," she tugged at his sleeve, dragging him out of his musings. "Are we going home?"

Ah, shit. He chewed at the inside of his cheek, casting a glance at Dazai and then at Sonoko's fingers still firmly grasping his shirt. Her gloves were black, just like his own. Kouyou and Yosano had bought her a brand-new pair, too, and they once again reminded Chuuya that he *knew* where the kid belonged. He just had to convince everybody else. Ever so slowly, he

placed a hand on her head.

"It's complicated, kiddo," he said. "But soon. I promise."

He just needed to butter up Boss and scream in Ango's ear for a little longer, or so he hoped.

“Shall we go inside? Miss Sonoko should have tea soon,” Adam chimed in, gesturing to the front door of the mansion. “And I certainly could use some scones and marmite.”

“Gross,” Shirase said, sticking his tongue out in a way that made Sonoko giggle.

“*You* are gross,” Dazai murmured, letting the child down so she could reach Adam's side.

“You said something, Tutankhamun?”

Dazai gawked. Chuuya could swear his eyes would have just rolled out of the man’s eye sockets. “What did you call me, you low-class Brutus?”

“Hu-*uuh,* why, aren’t you cosplaying as a mummy—? And will you fuck off, please? I’m trying to have a moment here with *my* old friend.”

Chuuya snickered and joined the rest of the group inside the house.

The ruckus that followed — which included Dazai almost choking on a scone, Sonoko making friendship bracelets with Shirase, and Chuuya almost *crying* as he was handed a little pink plastic monstrosity that suddenly meant the world to him — left the executive with a sense of laziness as if his blood had turned into jelly.

Adam congratulated Chuuya on his *‘relationship upgrade.'*
He said he always saw it coming. And then Dazai kissed his cheek without *asking* and Chuuya blushed, still half a prisoner of that voice that told him he did not deserve happiness. Terrified that his corrupt body would desecrate the word.

He felt heavy and light, the quietness of the place growing on him despite his resolve to hate everything about it.

The countryside was a nice place to raise the child, he had to admit. The Yamazaki family lived a secluded life, just the old couple and an enormous villa. Adam took Sonoko down to the city for school every day; she’d made herself some friends.

Murase would have been proud of that, right?
Murase, and Piano Man, and Albatross — they would have laughed joyfully too, looking at Sonoko and knowing she was safe. That Chuuya had done a decent job.

Perhaps that early spring was nothing but a gift from all the people who died, and who were now smiling at him.

—

Stepping into the sun-kissed backyard of the villa, Chuuya allowed the light to bask around him and bathe him in gold.

Although they'd traveled far out of Yokohama, some affairs from home still haunted him. Slipping his hands in his pockets and tching as he realized he'd forgotten the cigarettes inside the house, he reminded himself the Port Mafia was his home. It was the family he had chosen for himself.
But *Dazai*— he was Chuuya's beating heart. Mori had told him he would ask the President for Dazai to be exchanged in return for the mafia's help during the Hunting Dogs attack. Since Yosano was off the table, Dazai was the next best option.

Chuuya had informed his partner as soon as he heard the news, of course, for nothing of such importance was to stay secret between them anymore.
As they waited for all hell to break loose, though, Chuuya had to admit that running away felt tempting: he could take Sonoko and Dazai, and start anew. He could aim for something better. Sweet, sweet betrayal.

'The ripples of your decision will embrace the city,' Kouyou had said, and Chuuya could see what she meant now. He sensed the shift in the Double Black partnership, and how it had rearranged Chuuya's place within the Port Mafia's chessboard.

With an exhale, emptying his lungs, Chuuya tilted his head toward the sky. Tepid sunshine kissed his skin. The chirping of faraway birds filled his mind as he stood in the warmth and the light, dreaming lazy dreams of another life.

He thought about what his existence could have been like if he had allowed himself to be carried by the tide, instead of kicking his way through the current like he always did. Dreaming of where he'd be now if he'd never left the Sheep. If he'd saved the Flags at the Old World. If he'd met his parents, that day.
If Dazai had stayed, if he'd never spilled Petrus while damning his partner's name. *If.*

Speaking of which, the velvet sound of familiar footsteps approached him, then came to a halt at his right side. Without turning, Chuuya could recognize Dazai from just his breathing pattern, from the width of his steps and his warmth. He could *sense* his partner from his silence.

"Hey," Dazai greeted, reaching out for his hand. Hard knuckles brushed around the back of Chuuya's hands before Dazai intertwined their fingers together. "Why so sulky, Slug?"

"Screw you. I'm not sulking," Chuuya answered, focused on the burning trails of Dazai's digits on his skin.

They never allowed each other such displays of shameless proximity in Yokohama, all too aware of the rift opening between their organizations. They couldn't *fraternize* too much, not in public, or Mori would have gloated – licking his lips while savoring the inevitable deal that would drag Dazai back to the Mafia. Although he never said anything, Chuuya had a hunch the Agency's President frowned upon their union too.

No one was comfortable with Double Black thriving unbothered and uncontrolled. They were a well-oiled cog that everyone considered greatly useful, but only as long as they behaved predictably. That restlessness under Chuuya's skin was everything but.

He thought he'd finally found peace after seeing through the Rainmaker mission. Instead, he only felt empty.

I'm going to get this back, he wanted to think — but when, but *how?*

"I never thought I'd say it, but this little homecoming party brings back memories," Dazai said, breezy enough that one would have thought he genuinely enjoyed the reunion. *Lies,* of course. He squeezed Chuuya's hand and darted him a glance, eyes violently earnest. "Are you okay?"

"I think so, yes."

Dazai's lips quirked up. "I can go get Adam if you need an android joke to cheer you up."

"Ah-ah. Very funny."

"Chuuya," he called, so very slowly, his irises shining like marbles. They had the same color as honey, pure gold. "You've done well. *They* all know it, for what's worth. But I know this is not what you hoped for."

"No, it's not. Frankly, it sucks." He clicked his tongue and swallowed. "But she's gonna be safe and happy here, and that's all I wanted to see," he negotiated instead, words mellowing into the spring sunset. "That's all that really matters."
He didn't know who he was trying to convince: Dazai or himself. All he knew was that no amount of meaningless words would ever fill the space in his soul that Sonoko had carved for herself, opening up the possibility of a better future.
Now, Chuuya longed for that peace. He dreamed every day about all the things that he *could* have had. Those dreams kept him alive.

Wasn't it ironic? A dreamless man surviving on scraps of dreams.

"Certainly Adam's presence will keep her safe. He did defeat the King of Assassins, after all."

Chuuya grimaced. "Yeah. Not that we helped or anything."

"Didn't lift a finger, myself," Dazai said. Chuuya breathed in, enjoying how Dazai's thumb was skimming over his pulse point.

"Ne, Mackerel. Do you think she's happy?"

A moment of hesitation. Then, "I would say so," he said, glancing back at the house. "And her handwriting is getting better, which is a miracle in itself. Adam and your regicide friend are teaching her some English, too."

For a second, Chuuya parted his lips and considered arguing that Shirase wasn't a regicide and that they had moved past that betrayal a long time before. Then, he shut his mouth. It was pointless to even *try* to advocate for Shirase around Dazai — which was rather hypocritical, considering the bastard Mackerel had caused that fracture in the Sheep in the first place, but Chuuya reminded himself to cherry-pick his arguments. "That's good. So if the kiddo wants to get out of this god-forsaken country one day, she can."

Dazai scrunched his nose. "Surely you're not suggesting to move the child to *London."*

The honest, almost childish dislike dripping from every word made Chuuya chuckle.

"Why not? London is big. I'm not suggesting she joins the New Sheep, of course, but… she'll have people looking out for her there."

"We wouldn't be able to visit as much."

"But we could get vacations together," Chuuya answered, as if the thought of going on *holiday* didn't make him want to weep for joy. One day, he'd learn to stop overworking himself to the bone. "I would like to travel outside Japan. And I *know* you don't like Shirase, but he's good with kids. Always was. Sonoko would be protected by a whole organization."

Dazai grinned at him. That shit-eating, infuriating twitch of lips that kindled his eyes and did *things* to Chuuya. "The little Princess of the Sheep? Suits her."

"Oh, shut up."

However, when he rolled his eyes, Chuuya didn't entirely mean it.

"On this note— I'll let you know that, while Chuuya was brooding all alone, we were having a little drawing session inside*,"* Dazai said, with a purring sound rolling in his consonants that reminded Chuuya of a house cat. He stopped just long enough to chuckle softly, and his thumb skimmed over the back of Chuuya's naked hand – the slim fingers, the hard knuckles, the smooth skin. "And Sonoko made this little nice portrait of you as the King of the Sheep. Crown and all. Judas — pardon me, I meant *Shirase* — was throwing a fit. You should come inside and see it."

"Did ya tell her to draw me as a slug instead?"

"Take a guess," Dazai said, the wind carrying his chuckle.

With a scoff, the executive shook his head. *I love you,* he thought. "You are impossible," he said instead, which sounded like a good enough compromise between 'I love you' and 'I don't know what I am doing, taking up space and pretending I have a reason to be alive.'

Dazai grinned back at him and squeezed his hand harder.

Although he would have never admitted it out loud, half-tipsy and needing guidance, one night Chuuya had asked a silly Oracle website what the future would hold for his relationship with Dazai.

Stupid enough, right? He'd only done that because he had some time to waste, and because he'd gotten tired of trying to figure things out on his own.

'Pay attention to your dreams tonight,' the Oracle responded.

Ah. *Tough luck.*

Even if he tried to interpret the response – life's shitty when you get dream-related advice and you don't dream – it didn't satisfy him as much as he thought it would. Borrowed words carried no value.

The smell of sunlight filled his head as he inhaled, shuffling closer to Dazai.

"The landscape sure is beautiful here, though, isn't it?"

"It is."

"Makes me want to work even harder and buy a house like this, someday – somewhere nice and quiet, away from all the blood and violence. A farm or something, where there's plenty of light and places for our friends to stay over." He side-glanced at his partner, taking in his side profile. A gentle breeze combed through Dazai's curls. "A place where I can start a family of my own."

"That sounds nice," Dazai hummed.

"What do *you* say?"

With a slight tilt of his head, brown eyes blinked at him. "What does Chuuya mean?"

"Would you come with me?"

"I want to live with you," Dazai said, earnestly.

That kind of wanton confidence coming from a notorious suicidal rascal took Chuuya by surprise, making him turn and stare as if the man had grown a second head. The fact that Dazai wanted to live *at all* was nothing short of miraculous. Yet, he told himself, he should have been used to the striking juxtaposition of his partner's character – his ragged lies and his vulnerable truths.
Everything about him was whetted as a blade and equally startling.

In Dazai's strange vocabulary, such a confession cut deeper than any 'I love you.' Survival was, in some ways, absolute. As if he had tiptoed into the ocean and didn't realize that he'd suddenly plunged into the depths with just one misstep.
Falling for each other had been careless, exhausting, all in. An irreversible kind of business. It was the kind of love that blistered, that *scarred.* And bonding over grief had always been a part of it: their losses burned like acid over their bones – empty, porous bones with a decaying marrow.

Slowly, Chuuya nodded.

“Me too,” he said, still holding onto Dazai’s hand.

When he thought about how life was decomposing them alive with every passing second, Chuuya couldn’t think of a better way to be consumed by it than by standing by Dazai’s side.

Nothing had changed. So much had changed. Yokohama was still the same. They weren’t.

That summer was going to be pleasant, and Chuuya would stop by a shrine to thank an old detective friend and a group of almost-executives for their guidance from heaven. The spring air smelled like incense.

Everything was peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO!
Thank you so much for reading, and thank you for staying until the end! 🥺 It really means a lot and I hope you enjoyed this fic until the end. I wanted the epilogue to be somewhat specular to Stormbringer (Chuuya is outside of Yokohama, still dealing with his family and humanity, but he’s not alone) so I hope that shows haha. You can bet SKK came back to get Sonoko just as Chuuya promised, and that they visit every time they can.
And I love writing Parent SKK, so definitely expect more of them in the future 💕
Thank you once again for all the incredible support for this fic, I appreciate you guys so so so so much.

Edit: a couple of people wanted to see SKK living with Sonoko in the future, so stay tuned for an extra chapter of her moving back with SKK? If you’d like that? 👀

Comments and kudos make me super super happy, so let me know what you think of the story (emojis count)! 💕

Again, MAJOR thanks to my fantastic beta reader Malaika for all the patience and the time spent on this fic 🥺 And thank you so much Bea for helping me out with this last chapter ❤️ I appreciate you both so much!

See you in the next fic, and come scream at me on Twitter in the meantime!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!